My Big Sister Lives in a Fantasy World

THE WORLD'S STRONGEST LITTLE BROTHER

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Illust. An2A

Serial Killer
Their eyes met.
A terrifyingly beautiful girl had affixed Yuichi with a cold, sharp gaze.
Above her short-cropped hair floated the label "Serial Killer."
What does "Serial Killer" mean?! What would someone like that be doing here?!
Chapter 1: There Are More Weirdos Out There Than You'd Think
My Big Sister
LIVES IN A
FANTASY WORLD
THE WORLD'S STRONGEST LITTLE SISTER

WELCOME TO THE SURVIVAL CLUB!
WHAT IS THE SURVIVAL CLUB?
IT'S A CLUB FOR LEARNING THE KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS YOU NEED TO SURVIVE IN THIS CRUEL WORLD! IT CAN HELP YOU MAKE IT OUT OF DISASTERS, LARGE-SCALE TERRORIST STRIKES, AND OF COURSE, ONI AND YOKAI ATTACKS! (MUTSUKO SAKAKI)
Kanako Orihara
The survival club's vice president. Her specialty is isekai (traveling to other worlds or times).
Aiko Noro
Yuichi's classmate. She's really a vampire. Her hobby is making sweets.
Yuichi Sakaki
The protagonist. Now that he's in high school, he's attending the same school as his big sister.
Mutsuko Sakaki
Yuichi's big sister, and the president of the survival club. Her specialty is fictional martial arts.

A SERIAL KILLER!
HE'S NOT HUMAN?!
THERE'S NO WAY I CAN BEAT HIM!
IF HE ONLY HAS ONE HORN, THAT MEANS HE'S PROBABLY WEAK!
Chapter 5: The Battle Against Serial Killer II

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Prologue: The Soul Reader Awakens!

"Mom! Yu's awakened his magic sight! This calls for sekihan rice to celebrate!"

"Oh, dear. I don't know quite what you're talking about, but if that's a good thing, sekihan rice is what we'll have."

Yuichi nearly spat out his breakfast miso soup.

No, I'm okay. No one really does that outside of anime and manga.

His big sister, Mutsuko, had made a big production to him about how he couldn't tell anyone about his sight — what if a secret society came after him?! Yet apparently, she saw nothing wrong with telling their parents.

He glared at her, willing her to stop talking about it.

Mutsuko grinned back at him, clearly misinterpreting the gesture. She didn't get it at all.

Mutsuko was just entering her second year of high school, the same high school Yuichi would be attending starting today. People said she was good-looking, though Yuichi, being her brother and all, couldn't really confirm or deny this.

Her hair was long and held in place with a variety of metal hair clips. To the casual observer, they just looked like barrettes shaped to resemble knives, but she always bragged that they were real blades made from Damascus steel.

Her build was slender and her chest was modest, but that didn't seem to bother her. She always said that having a big chest would just get in the way, and it sounded like she really meant it.

His mom was very easygoing, so the talk of magic sight didn't bother her. She probably didn't even know what "magic sight" was.

Yuichi checked his father's reaction, but he was focused on his newspaper, occasionally taking a bite of food. He didn't seem especially interested in the conversation.

Yuichi's little sister, Yoriko, was enjoying her breakfast as if everything were normal. Mutsuko was always saying weird things like that, so she barely seemed to notice.

Yoriko would be starting her second year of middle school today. Unlike Mutsuko, who paid little mind to her appearance, Yoriko was very concerned with looking pretty. Her long, black hair suited her very well, and she took very good care of it. She wouldn't dream of afflicting it with bizarre ornaments like her sister did. Her face resembled Mutsuko's, but she had a serene air about her, and as far as womanly proportions went, she already outstripped her.

The talk of magic sight continued. Yuichi looked around the table, and let out a sigh. Maybe he should have done more to get her to keep her mouth shut. He thought back to the incident of the night before.

It had been after midnight. Yuichi had rapped softly on the door to Mutsuko's room.

Their parents and their little sister would all be sleeping soundly by that time, but he knew Mutsuko would be up late doing some weird thing or another.

The door opened right away and Mutsuko stood before him. She was dressed in pink pajamas, staring at Yuichi in confusion.

"Yu? What are you doing here at this hour?"

"Um, there's something I wanted your help with..."

"Sure thing! You're gonna tell me about your collection of big sister fetish games, right? Don't worry, I don't mind a bit!" Mutsuko puffed out her chest.

Yuichi had no idea where she'd gotten that idea from, but she sounded extremely proud of it.

"That's not it!"

"That's the only reason a young man ever visits his big sister's room in the middle of the night! I've seen it in anime!"

"But this isn't anime, it's real life."

The comeback lacked the force of his convictions. What he was about to ask her was the opposite of realistic.

"Anyway, quit standing out there and come inside so we can talk, okay?" Mutsuko beckoned him inside.

She still had her kotatsu out, though the heater underneath the low table was unnecessary here in early spring. They both walked up to it and took a seat.

Yuichi hadn't been inside Mutsuko's room in a long time. The sight of it being even more cluttered than it used to be left him feeling slightly drained.

He picked up a pamphlet from the table. The title was "Bulletproof Abs." The cover featured a blown-up image of a set of abs. They certainly looked like they could deflect bullets.

Yuichi began doing some basic clean-up on the books scattered haphazardly across the tabletop.

King of Grip Strength, King of Joints, The Complete Bajiquan, Why Didn't Masahiko Kimura Kill Rikidozan?, The Science of Releasing Your Internal Power... those titles and more got swept into a neat pile at the edge of the kotatsu. He just couldn't stand sitting at a messy table.

But sorting out that one minor mess didn't change the deplorable state of the rest of the room. The most obvious bits of clutter were the weapons strewn all around.

There were lots of Chinese weapons: guandao, emeici, chain whips, meteor hammers, miaodao...

For Western-style weapons, there were quarterstaffs, crossbows, main gauches...

For Indian weapons, madu and a katar...

There were Japanese-style weapons, too. Manri-gusari, jutte, shurikens, and even katanas. The fans seemed a little feminine, at least, but they were made from steel... in other words, more weapons.

Yuichi had known that she had weapons, but not that she had so many, nor that she left them lying around out in the open like this. The paranoid question of what would happen if someone stepped on one began to gnaw at him.

Still, it wasn't like the room would be appropriately girlish, even if you ignored the weapons. The floor was a mess of winding cables and mysterious circuit boards. There was a line of what looked like lockers piled up against one wall, filled with flickering machines. And even setting *those* aside, there were the masks, the paper talismans, and the altar, all with purposes unknown.

Yuichi pushed it all out of his mind. If he let himself dwell on it, he'd never stop.

"Okay! What'd you want to talk about?" Mutsuko asked enthusiastically. She was often roping Yuichi into things, but he couldn't remember the last time he had come to her for advice. Maybe that was why her eyes brimmed with anticipation.

"Um, well, see... ever since yesterday, I've been seeing strange things, and I'm not sure why," Yuichi explained, fumbling for the right words.

"Oh?" Mutsuko leaned forward over the table, exploding into an interrogation.

"What is it? What? What are you seeing? Huh? Lines? Lines of death? Have you got Mystic Eyes of Death Perception? We've gotta get you some glasses! But what do they even make those out of? Or can you see chakras? Have you got All Seeing White Eyes? Mirror Wheel Eyes? Or can you see ghosts? Is it ghost sight?"

"Calm down! It's nothing that serious!"

"Got it! Hold on a second." She took in a deep breath, clearly trying to calm herself.

"Okay! What are you seeing?"

"Um, it's really not that big of a deal... I hope you didn't get your hopes up too much, because it's just... um... words."

"Words?"

"I see words above people's heads."

"That's all?" Mutsuko was clearly disappointed. Even though he was the one coming to her for advice, he almost felt like he had let her down.

But she bounced back quickly, leaning forward again.

"Right! Maybe it's not a combat-based magic sight! But it's still

amazing! So, is there anything over my head right now? Can you see my lifespan, maybe? I've seen that in horror movies!"

"It just says 'Big Sister.'"

"Huh?"

The words "Big Sister" were floating over Mutsuko's head in big black letters.

"Above Mom's head it says 'Mom.' Above Yori's head it says 'Little Sister.'"

Mutsuko, Yuichi, and Yoriko were siblings. They and their parents comprised the five-member Sakaki family.

"What does that mean? I don't get it."

"I don't get it, either! I have no idea what's going on, so I haven't gone outside at all since it started up yesterday. But I have school tomorrow, so I can't just stay inside. I thought you might know something."

Yuichi had slept in on the last day of spring break, then gone to the kitchen for a late breakfast. That was when he noticed.

His mom was in the kitchen cooking, with the word "Mom" hovering over her head in black letters.

He blinked several times, thinking maybe he was still half-dreaming. But no matter how many times he blinked or rubbed his eyes, the black letters remained.

He wolfed down his food, then returned to his room. He thought maybe he was just overtired from spring vacation, so went back to bed. But it was all the same when he woke up. All he managed to do was confirm that he could see words over his sisters' heads, too.

"So can you see something above your own head?"

"I couldn't see anything when I looked in the mirror. Maybe I have to look at it directly... anyway, that's all I know. Any idea what it could be?"

"Hold on! Just wait a minute!" Mutsuko pressed one hand to her forehead, and thrust the other toward Yuichi, palm out.

"Okay, but what's wrong with me?"

"I'm thinking! You got a problem with that?" Mutsuko held the pose, apparently deep in thought.

She was the type of person who, once off in her own little world, couldn't see anything else around her. She might stay that way all night if he let her.

Yuichi was just about to head back to his room when Mutsuko moved again.

"Soul Reader... That's it! That's what it's like! Maybe you've got magic eyes that can read a person's true nature?"

"Huh? So 'Big Sister' is your true nature?"

“Yeah! There’s no big sister more big sister-y than me!” Mutsuko puffed out her chest. She’d always seemed to take particular pride in being a big sister, even above and beyond her usual boastfulness.

“I guess that goes for ‘Mom’ and ‘Little Sister’ and ‘Dad,’ too. Maybe it’s not worth worrying about.”

Hearing Mutsuko make so much noise about it had Yuichi feeling a bit foolish for worrying. So what if he saw the words “Big Sister” over his big sister’s head?

“By the way! Do you have any idea what might have awakened the power within you?”

“Huh? No... it was just there when I woke up in the morning.”

Although he had come to her for advice, he was a little surprised by how quick she was to believe in stuff like magic sight. She always talked about stuff in anime and manga like they really existed, but he’d always figured it was at least partly a put-on.

“Were you shot by an arrow or something?”

“I think I’d remember!”

“Did you eat a fruit with a spiral pattern on it?”

“I think I’d remember that, too.”

“Did you hear a voice asking, ‘Do you desire power?’”

“If I had, that would’ve been the first thing I asked about.”

“Hmm, I guess it’s the trope where you’re not aware of it... the influence of a Demon Quake or a Hell’s Gate...”

“Sorry, but I can’t give you any more than what I’ve already told you. I’ve already racked my brain for possible causes.”

Mutsuko sank back into deep thought. “Nanomachines, maybe... or a Pandora’s Box? We can’t rule out Personas, either...” After musing to herself for several seconds, she finally looked back up at Yuichi. “You must not tell anyone about this! You might end up the object of a superhuman hunt!”

“Who would do something like that?”

BIG SISTER

“A secret society! Yes, there could be a secret society for things like this! Be careful! They might find you and gouge out your eyes!”

“Hey, don’t say stuff like that!”

Obviously, Yuichi had no intention of telling anyone else about this. Only his weirdo sister would take a story like this seriously. Anyone else would doubt his sanity.

“I’m not going to tell anyone. So you keep it to yourself too, okay?”

“You got it! I’ll protect you from the secret societies, Yu!” There was pride in her voice as she clapped a hand against her chest. The sight really did fill him with confidence.

No matter what happens, my sister will be on my side. She may have been a little eccentric, but she had never let him down so far. Though he felt a little pathetic having to rely on her like this, talking to her really had relieved a lot of his worries.

But he started to regret it the moment he heard his sister asking for sekihan rice.

Maybe he shouldn’t have come to her, after all.

He could feel the dark clouds forming as he faced his first day of high school.

Chapter 1: There Are More Weirdos Out There Than You'd Think

Prefectural Seishin High School. That was the name of the school Yuichi would be attending. The reason he'd chosen it was simple: It was the closest public high school to their house. It was only a ten minute walk away. It was also a completely normal high school, and he hadn't had to go to any great lengths to get in.

The new blazer felt unnatural on him as he shrugged it on and headed out. The school's boys' uniform was a navy blue blazer and necktie with checkered pants. The girls wore a ribbon and a checkered skirt.

Yuichi had decided to leave the house early rather than wait for Mutsuko. Remaining at the table, with all the talk about magic sight, had quickly become unbearable.

This would be his first time meeting other people since he'd acquired his strange vision. What would he see above other people's heads? He had his answer right away.

"Company Employee." "Civil Servant." "Secretary." "High School Student." "Middle School Student."

It's exactly what they seem to be.

There were all kinds of people on the road to school, and the words above their heads matched their appearances. Though normally, he wouldn't have been able to tell the company employees from the civil servants.

As he got closer to school, the crowd got bigger, and he started seeing slightly different labels.

"Peer."

That word was intermingling, here and there.

He looked around at the faces attached to the labels. They were students the same age as Yuichi.

Maybe it wasn't all that big a deal? It was a little distracting, but if he didn't think about it too hard, he would get used to it eventually. Yuichi was starting to feel optimistic.

Before long, he arrived at school.

He passed through the gate, followed the markers for the opening ceremony, did his sign-in, then entered the auditorium.

Rows of benches were set up at the center. Yuichi headed for the seats for his class, 1-C.

The students sitting there all had "Classmate" over their heads, while

the students in the other classes were all labeled “Peer.” Apparently being in the same class was enough to cause a change in label.

Seating wasn’t assigned, so he took a seat beside “Friend,” who had arrived before him. If that was all these labels were, there was really nothing to worry about. Yuichi was starting to feel comfortable with the odd situation.

“Haven’t seen you since graduation, Yu.”

“Hey, Tak. It’s been a while.”

Yuichi and Takuro Oda had been in the same class in middle school. Takuro was short, laid-back, quiet, and always smiling. He was Yuichi’s best friend.

They chatted a little bit about how they’d spent their time off while “Principal” got up on the stage and began addressing the new students who filled the benches.

After the entrance ceremony, a teacher led them to their classroom. It wasn’t their homeroom teacher — apparently, despite this being the first day of school, she was running late.

The room was as noisy and chaotic as you would expect with the homeroom teacher missing on the first day of class. A few cliques seemed to have formed already.

Yuichi’s seat was in the very back of the room, the second row from the window. It seemed they were starting off in roll order.

“Hey!”

The student sitting in front of Yuichi snapped him out of his reverie, turning his seat backwards to strike up a conversation.

He was a full head taller than Yuichi and seemed athletic, like a guy who played sports. He was also, clearly, the kind of guy who wasn’t afraid of starting up a conversation with a stranger.

“Shota Saeki! Nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Yuichi Sakaki.”

“...Ace Striker?”

A label he’d never seen before, “Ace Striker,” was hanging over Shota Saeki’s head. Yuichi couldn’t help but read it out loud. Just a few moments ago, it had read “Classmate.”

“What, you play soccer, too? Have we met before?”

“Oh, uh, nah. I just thought you looked like the soccer type.”

“Yeah, I get that a lot!”

You do? Really? What exactly is “the soccer type”? But apparently he’d bought the excuse. Shota was clearly the uncomplicated sort.

“Hey, have you got any sisters?” Shota stared keenly into Yuichi’s face.

“Huh? Where did that come from?”

“You just look like the kinda guy who’d have hot sisters.”

“I have a sister who’s a second-year here.”

“Oh, okay! Let me meet her!”

“Jeez, you don’t beat around the bush, do you?”

It seemed he was the straightforward sort, too. He must have lived a very simple life.

“I don’t think you want to go after my big sister. She’s what you’d call an unfortunate case.”

“Unfortunate?”

“She pretty and all, but her personality is… let’s say, questionable. Her hobbies are… uh, niche.”

“What, she’s one of those fujoshi types? But that’s pretty common nowadays, right?”

A few of the girls nearby flinched. Maybe they thought he was talking about them. The label “Fujoshi” hung above their heads.

I was right… the labels are actually changing.

Yuichi took another look around. All around him, the labels were changing to things like “Lolicon,” “Siscon,” “Train Geek,” “Bookworm”…

He began to feel a stinging pain behind his eyes. It felt like the pain associated with eye strain, but it faded after a while.

“What’s wrong?” Shota asked, narrowing his eyes suspiciously at Yuichi’s sudden activity.

“Oh, it’s nothing.”

But this might be a problem after all, he realized. When he saw a label change, he couldn’t help but stop and think about it. That could really have an impact on how he lived his life.

“Um, we were talking about my sister, right? About that… She’s got middle school syndrome. A really bad case.”

“Middle school syndrome? She’s sick?”

“No, not sick. Um, how to put it… It’s like being really obsessive about stuff.” Explaining would be more trouble than it was worth, so he just picked the closest easy example.

“Hey, have you got a picture of your sister?”

“What kind of guy would carry around a picture of his big sist—” But before he could even finish that thought, he remembered he had some photo booth stickers in his bag that they’d taken together. He’d said he didn’t want them, but she’d pushed them on him.

“Oh, so you *have* got one? Let’s have a look!”

“Fine…” He didn’t want to come off like an uncooperative jerk, after all. He reached for his bag, placed it on the desk and started rummaging through it.

“Hey, what’s that?” Shota pointed at the bag. He’d taken interest in a hunk of metal poking out of it.

“This? This is the Captains of Crush Gripper No. 4. It’s for improving your grip strength.”

“Huh? That’s weird. Can I see?”

Yuichi pulled the gripper from his bag and handed it to Shota.

The Captains of Crush Gripper was an advanced gripper made by IronMind Enterprises, Inc., designed to improve your grip strength. They ranged from No. 1 to No. 4. To close No. 4, you needed a grip strength of about 160 kg. There was no way an average high school student could close it.

Shota strained hard, trying to close it. Yuichi watched him out of the corner of his eye as he searched for the photo booth stickers.

"What, class chaos on the very first day? What part of 'wait quietly in your seats' didn't you understand? Well, whatever. Just take your seats already. I'm Hanako Nodayama, and I'm your homeroom teacher."

Yuichi's search for the photo stickers was interrupted by a feminine, incredibly unmotivated voice. He stopped to look up at the teacher's lectern.

At some point, a woman bearing the label "Homeroom Teacher" had arrived in the room. She didn't look comfortable in the suit she was wearing... to put it mildly. Her hair was a total mess, with a half-assed brown dye job. She didn't seem to care about her appearance at all.

"Let me say one thing to start off: Do not mess with me. Now hand out these print-outs. Um, you there. Split 'em up and pass 'em back. Everything you need to know for high school life is on there. You hear me? It's all on there. So you won't need me to explain anything or answer any questions. Got it?" Hanako forced the print-outs on the first student she saw.

Their homeroom teacher's attitude seemed to be having an immediately demoralizing effect on the class. The papers were passed out according to Hanako's instructions.

"Huh? I don't think there are enough," Shota said as he turned back to face Yuichi. It seemed Shota had gotten the last for their row.

Yuichi looked around to see if any rows had gotten extra. It looked like Yuichi was the only one who hadn't gotten one.

"Excuse me, but I didn't get a print-out," Yuichi called out, holding up his hand.

A few students turned to look at Yuichi.

He suddenly felt a stinging pain behind his eyes. He squeezed them shut as the world turned white around him.

"Hey, what's with you? You got middle school syndrome or something? One of those 'Hnngh! Be still, my right eye!' types? Because high school seems a little late to start that stuff." Hanako's words were mixed with mocking laughter.

"...Ah, sorry. It was just a sudden headache. I'm fi—" Yuichi began to sit up, then froze, his jaw going slack.

"Zombie."

"Witch."

"Anthromorph."
"Dating Sim Childhood Friend."
"Vampire."

A whole crowd of people with bizarre labels were looking at him. Everyone's labels were different. Before then, they had all just been "Classmate."

What's going on? But he didn't have more than a second to to think about it. Someone's eyes were fixed on him. He turned to look, and felt a new chill run though him.

"Serial Killer."

Their eyes met.

A terrifyingly beautiful girl had affixed Yuichi with a cold, sharp gaze. Above her short-cropped hair floated the label "Serial Killer."

What does "Serial Killer" mean?! What would someone like that be doing here?!

He didn't understand it at all. He turned back pleadingly to "Ace Striker" in front of him, realizing at the same time that he could do nothing to help.

"What's with the gawking, huh? Trying to pick a fight with your homeroom teacher on your first day, are you?" Hanako's drawl pulled Yuichi back to reality.

"Oh, um, I'm sorry. I just didn't get a print-out."

"Anyone have extra? Guess there's not enough, then. Someone share with him." The teacher sounded like she didn't care the least bit how it turned out.

"You can look at mine," Shota said, offering his own print-out helpfully.

"It's up to you guys to read it for yourselves. Don't come crying to me later saying that you weren't aware of something. Now I guess we'll use the rest of our time for introductions. Come up to the front in roll order and tell us who you are."

Yuichi looked at the print-out Shota had given him. It had a seating chart, too.

"Serial Killer" was Natsuki Takeuchi. Her roll number was 37. Her seat was the second from the front on the right side.

Even with all those weird labels like "Zombie" and "Witch," "Serial Killer" seemed the most extreme. How else to interpret it other than that she was a murderer?

For that matter, what do the labels even represent?

He had assumed they had something to do with the person's role in society, but he didn't have any solid proof of that. Still, given what he had seen so far, they did seem to relate to the person's life somehow.

As Yuichi turned the problem over in his mind, the students began introducing themselves. Yuichi was #14, so he had a ways to go. He decided to listen to the introductions while he could. Maybe he'd gain some insight into the nature of the labels.

"Zombie" was Risa Ayanokoji. She was a girl with two ponytails mounted high on her head.

"Hello! I'm Risa Ayanokoji. I know my last name sounds pretty fancy, but we're not rich, so don't sponge off me, okay? I played volleyball in middle school, and I'll probably do it in high school, too!"

She seemed a bit on the dense side, but she spoke energetically enough. Her complexion was healthy, too. There was nothing zombie-like about her.

I don't get it... What does "Zombie" mean?

Did it mean she was dead? But how?

"Witch" was An Katagiri.

She had long black hair, with bangs long enough to hide her eyes, and an aura of gloom all around her. She certainly resembled his idea of a witch.

"I'm An Katagiri. I don't have any hobbies, so I'll keep it brief, but there is one thing I want to warn you about. I am in love with Takuro Oda, who sits in the seat next to mine. I will not let anyone take him from me. If you try to go after Oda, I'll kill you."

Huh? What the hell?!

Yuichi had never heard such an intense introduction in his life. The rest of his classmates seemed to feel the same way. The whole room burst into whispers.

Takuro, clearly feeling put on the spot, opened his eyes wide and flapped his mouth, dumbstruck.

It didn't seem like they knew each other. Yuichi couldn't recall ever seeing her before.

Above Takuro's head, the label that had said "Friend" now changed to "Witch's Beloved."

Could certain events be changing the words? In this case, it must have been An Katagiri's introduction. Yuichi's confusion deepened.

"Hey, cut out the bad jokes. You're scaring people. Besides, you'd just get sent to prison if you did that." Shota's joking voice rung out in the middle of the clamor.

"I don't care if I'm caught. After they release me, I'll find Oda again and we'll be married for life. If he's already married by then, then I'll kill his wife and children, too. So, Oda. If you try to marry anyone else, you'll just be forcing them into a tragic end. If that's what you want, then go ahead and do it." She spoke the words with absolute confidence.

Does "Witch" refer to her personality, maybe?

"Anthromorph" was Yuri Konishi.

The first thing he noticed was her glorious golden hair, which was bound up in a bizarre and complicated style. Her haughty bearing suggested that she was the daughter of a rich family.

Despite the blonde hair, though, her name and facial features were both Japanese. Maybe she was half-Japanese.

Whatever the reason, her eye-catching appearance sent whispers throughout the classroom, and her introduction only made it worse.

"Let me begin by making one thing clear. I come from a wealthy family. Japanese law forbids class segregation, but as high school students, I am sure that you are aware that money creates differences in status. A person's worth is directly connected to their wealth. In that respect, I stand high above commoners such as yourselves. You may think this nothing more than the arrogance of the wealthy, but we are about to spend an entire year together as classmates, and I do not wish to see any misfortune befall you. Thus, I thought it best to make certain things clear, to prevent any misunderstandings in your interactions with me that might give you later cause for regret. I advise you all to take this information into account before attempting to approach me."

Shota turned back to Yuichi. His gaze read "here's another crazy chick."

Maybe she was as rich and powerful as she claimed. No normal person would have such an arrogant view of their classmates.

But I don't get how that makes her an Anthromorph...

Yuichi was just growing more and more baffled.

"Dating Sim Childhood Friend" was Yoko Sugimoto.

Dating Sim?!

"Witch" and "Anthromorph" were at least things he understood. But this label didn't make any sense to him at all. Did that mean she acted like a stereotypical childhood friend you saw in dating games?

She seemed like a totally normal girl. Her appearance and her introduction were both utterly unremarkable. But as he was thinking that over, his eyes fell upon a male student. He was "Dating Sim Protagonist," and judging from the seating chart, his name was Koichi Makise.

That's right, they were talking to each other before, and I think she was teasing him...

Maybe "Childhood Friend" referred to her relationship to him. It couldn't have anything to do with Yuichi.

"Vampire" was Aiko Noro. She was a petite, pretty girl with short bobbed hair.

But she's standing right in the sunlight... I thought that killed vampires? It was a clear day, with sunlight streaming into the classroom.

"Um, I'm Aiko Noro! I chose this school 'cause it was the closest to my house, but I'm not too smart, so it was pretty hard to get in. I think I was right on the line. But I'm gonna work hard to study and have fun, too, so let's do our best together, okay?"

She seemed like a ball of energy. There wasn't a trace of anything vampiric in her. *Though she does seem a little pale for a Japanese girl...*

A little foreign, maybe? But that was the only remotely vampiric thing he could identify.

The introductions had only made the labels more confusing. The only one that made any sense was "Witch," and even then, all he knew about her was that she was a little eccentric. Yuichi was about to give up, when his attention refocused on a single person.

"Serial Killer," Natsuki Takeuchi.

Her cold, sharp eyes and neatly arranged, short-cropped hair did give the impression of a killer.

"I'm Natsuki Takeuchi. I just moved here from the country, and I'm feeling kind of overwhelmed by all the people here in the city. This school seems full of people, so I'll do my best to learn from you all." She seemed like a cold person, though it could be because of his preconceptions. There was something brusque and alienating about her.

Still, the contents of her introduction had been entirely inoffensive. There was nothing in them to suggest that she was a murderer. Even so, Yuichi couldn't take his eyes off that terrible label above her head: "Serial Killer."

At last, homeroom ended. Since there were no classes that day, they were free to go home. Yuichi thought about checking in with Takuro — now "Witch's Beloved" — but he'd fled the classroom at his first chance. The other students were starting to file out, as well.

Part of Yuichi wanted to run straight home, too, but he decided to stick around and sort out his thoughts. He remained at his desk with the seating chart, comparing labels, names, introduction speeches...

His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of Shota's voice.

"What's with this thing? It doesn't even work!"

Shota returned the gripper to Yuichi. He'd apparently given up on closing it.

"Well, you can't go right to that one. If you really want to do it, I'll lend you No. 1. You need 60 kg of grip strength to close that one."

"Nah, it's not like I need that for soccer anyway. Can you close it?"

"You know isometric training? I use it for that."

Isometric training was a type of muscle training based around holding a single position, like pushing an immovable wall. The little white lie seemed like less trouble than admitting that he really could close it.

"Think I've heard of that. So, you've been scowling at that names list

for a while."

"I figured I'd try to memorize everyone's names." Another white lie.

"Oh, is that all? I thought you were ranking the girls or something. Let me see." Shota snatched the list away. Of course, it was Shota's to begin with, so Yuichi couldn't really complain.

Shota started making marks next to the girls' names.

"Natsuki Takeuchi, Aiko Noro, Yuri Konishi. Those are the top three. The next tier are Miyu Hirata, Sayaka Haraguchi... and An Katagiri, I guess. She seems a little crazy, though. Still, I'm glad we got a class full of hot girls."

Yuichi had been in no condition to think about it at the time, but looking back, he remembered that the boys had started whispering each time a girl got up to speak.

"This is gonna be a great year! Well, I'd better get going. Gotta say hi to my seniors in the soccer club."

Everyone else in the classroom had left while they were talking. Shota stood up and left, too.

Yuichi couldn't just stay in the classroom. He decided to visit the bathroom before heading home.

There were students from other classes out in the hall. "Peer" was the only label above their heads.

Yuichi went to the bathroom, did his business, and washed his hands, lost in thought.

He didn't know what the labels were conveying. In fact, he didn't want to know. He didn't want to take them at face value. *I mean, come on... There's no such thing as zombies or vampires...*

They had all read "Classmate" at first, but at some point, they had changed.

Did it say something above his head, then? Maybe there was something new there...

He looked up to check the mirror, but what he saw there was the last thing he expected.

"Serial Killer."

Natsuki Takeuchi was standing behind him.

"Hey. You were looking at me before, right?"

"Um, this is the boys' bathroom..." A chill went up Yuichi's spine. He hadn't even heard Natsuki's approach. He'd been lost in thought, sure... but it was unbelievable that he hadn't noticed her until she was right behind him.

Something pricked against his back. It felt like a blade.

"It doesn't bother me, so it shouldn't bother you. Now, answer my question. You were looking at me, weren't you? Why? Do I seem that strange? I thought I was blending in."

"You looked at me first, right? So I looked back at you..." He remembered how he'd panicked and looked away right after meeting her eyes. Maybe that was what had tipped her off. Certainly he'd been looking at her a little longer than might be normal, but that shouldn't have been enough to give him away.

"Listen. I've had people look at me that way before. I recognize the shock in someone's eyes when they find out I'm a killer. Would you please just tell me how you knew? It would be useful, for future reference."

The knife at his back moved ever-so-slightly. It was a threat.

Yuichi was in a cold sweat. The label above her head must be true.

"Are you a... serial killer?"

She didn't seem like she was about to kill him, so he treaded the waters carefully.

"I guess so. I kill people pretty much daily. But I don't like to bring that into my everyday life, so I haven't tried to kill anyone at this school. That's why I'm surprised that someone has caught on already. So, how did you know?"

He wondered how best to answer her. He'd seen enough to know that any attempt to lie would backfire, so he opted for the truth.

"I see words above people's heads. It says 'Serial Killer' above yours. There are others in class, too, like 'Witch' and 'Zombie.'"

"...I believe you." Natsuki's eyes met Yuichi's through the mirror before she gave her diagnosis.

"You believe me?" He was surprised that she accepted it so easily. He certainly wouldn't, if someone said that to him.

"Yeah. There's definitely a zombie here. A puppet, too, I think... 'Witch' I'm less certain about... but I wouldn't be surprised."

"...You make it all sound so matter-of-fact. How can you tell?"

"Wax food doesn't make you hungry, does it? Even if it's made to look just like the real thing." She made that sound like it was the explanation, but it made no sense to Yuichi.

"I don't get it! What *is* all this? Witches and vampires and serial killers? Where'd you all come from? Why are you congregating in my class?"

"Who knows? I'm sure it wasn't intentional. There are quite a few others like me out there, so it probably only seems that way because you can identify us. But we usually try not to interfere in each others' affairs, so you shouldn't expect any problems."

Natsuki withdrew her blade.

"Ah, well. It's not as if I came here to kill you. But one word of warning: Don't tell anyone else about me. If you do, I'll kill everyone in this school, then disappear. If you want to see a bloodbath, go ahead and talk. But I've been looking forward to high school, and I don't want to have you ruining my life here."

And that was that, it seemed. Natsuki walked past the row of toilets and put her hand on the sill of the window to the outside.

"Best of luck to you this year, Yuichi Sakaki."

With that, she leaped out the window.

"Huh?"

An instant later, the door opened, and a male student walked in.

His arrival must have been why she left so quickly. But he couldn't believe she'd jumped out the window without a moment's hesitation. The bathroom they were in was on the fourth floor!

Yuichi fled.

He knew he should have checked to make sure Natsuki hit the ground safely, but he couldn't stand to stay there another second. His mind was a jumble of confusion.

Seeing a few words is no big deal? Of course it's a big deal! He ran back to the classroom, grabbed his bag, then raced home at full speed. The speed itself caused heads to turn...

Chapter 2: The Vampire is Dying Somewhere Around There

The little girl, Mutsuko, gazed intently at Yuichi.

They were sitting on the porch of a classical Japanese house out in the country. It was the house they had lived in when Yuichi was still a small child.

It was nighttime, but the porch was brightly lit by the gentle glow of a full moon above.

It was late summer. The hum of the insects was noisy around them.

“Mom and Dad won’t make it.”

Yuichi didn’t understand what she meant, but being a child, he assumed it must be something lethal.

If his awesome big sister, who knew everything and could do everything, said so, it must be true.

But that was no reason to just accept it.

“Why not?” Yuichi asked.

“Some day, there’s going to be an explosive change... a catastrophe. Mom and Dad won’t be able to handle it. Adults never can. They aren’t equipped to deal with drastic changes in their lives.”

Yuichi screwed up his face, tears streaming down his cheeks. It was too much. The thought of never seeing his beloved parents again was like a clamp pressing down on his heart.

She continued in somber tones. “I know it hurts to hear it, but I can only tell a certain number of people. So I chose you.” She clearly wasn’t joking.

“Yori... What about Yori?” He looked back through the gap in the sliding door at their little sister, Yoriko, sleeping wrapped in a terrycloth blanket.

“Yori... she might not make it, either.” Mutsuko choked the words out.

“No way! How can you say that? She’s still so little! That’s not fair!”

“...I just don’t think she’ll be able to take it...”

“Don’t worry! I’ll beat up that stupid cat... that stupid cats-trophy thing! I’ll protect you and Yori and Dad and Mom and everyone!” Yuichi took a bold leap off the porch, throwing a fist into the air as he swore his oath.

Mutsuko’s eyes filled with tears, moved by his brave promise.

“Yes... That’s right. It’s not like me... I’m not the type to freeze in the face of despair. Okay! Leave it to your big sister! I’ll make you...”

And that was when he woke up.

"That was... a dream, right?" He thought he'd been remembering something, but it vanished into a mist the moment he woke up. The memory was now fuzzy, a million miles away...

He sat up and looked out the window. It was still dark outside.

He'd been tossing and turning in bed for hours, but he must have finally gotten to sleep. Now that he was awake, it was no good. He couldn't get back to sleep. He instead headed out into the hallway, walked up to Mutsuko's door, and knocked. She was the only person he could talk to about the cause of his insomnia: his "sight."

Part of him expected her to be asleep already, but she answered the door right away.

She was in a Chinese outfit known as a pao — commonly referred to as "kung-fu clothes" — which she was apparently wearing as pajamas. "Is it time to talk about big sister fetish games?!"

"No! And why do you even want that?"

"Well, I'd be worried if they were little sister fetish games."

"It's neither!"

"Oh, well. Come on in!"

She beckoned him in, and he took a seat at the kotatsu once more. The room was as cluttered as ever.

"Hey... remind me what 'catastrophe' means?"

"It's a mathematical theory. It's used to describe orderly systems disrupted by abrupt chaotic phenomena. It can also refer to a disastrous change in an otherwise everyday life... Is that what you came here to ask me?"

"Oh, no, that's not important. I came to ask about... what did you call it, my Soul Reader? I'm starting to see even weirder things..."

Yuichi described his first day at school.

Of course he left out his encounter with the "Serial Killer," Natsuki Takeuchi. Her claim that she would slaughter everyone at school if he talked about it weighed heavily on him. And given what had happened at breakfast that morning, he had his doubts that Mutsuko could keep a secret. There was no way he could tell her.

"Very interesting!" Mutsuko's eyes shone.

"Er, could you please not call it interesting?"

"So the labels changed?"

"Yeah. At first they all just said 'Classmate,' but then they started changing to stuff like 'Ace Striker.'"

"And then your eyes started to hurt, and you started picking up scary stuff like 'Zombie' and 'Vampire'? Any aliens, time travelers, or psychics?"

"Nothing that strange just yet..." Though he couldn't pretend an alien was that much stranger than zombie.

"Well, you might see them soon enough!"

“I really hope not... So, does that tell you anything?”

“Good question. From what you told me before, the words seemed to represent something about a person’s relationship to you, but...”

“I can’t see what ‘Witch’ and ‘Vampire’ would have to do with me.”

Sure, “Big Sister” and “Friend” described relationships to Yuichi, but most of the labels didn’t fit that scheme at all.

“I see... that means we’re in Act 2! You’ve leveled up and reached a new stage of your abilities! But as for what the labels mean now... Hmm, I wish we could get a broader sample... It’s almost like the content of their soul... Their personality or something...” Mutsuko was drifting off into her own little world again.

“Hey, stay with me.”

“Oh, sorry. So, what does my label say? Same as before?”

“It still says ‘Big Sister.’”

“What the heck? Could you at least give me a more interesting label?”

“It’s not my decision!”

“I’ll think over what Soul Reader means... but be careful, okay? You might start seeing things some people would rather keep unseen. And if they know you can see them, they might come after you.”

Yuichi gulped. He couldn’t help but think of “Serial Killer,” Natsuki Takeuchi.

“Come on, like that would happen. It’s not like they’re really zombies or witches, so why would they attack me?”

“What makes you think that?”

“Huh? Well, society couldn’t function with all those weird creatures around...” He tried to say it to convince himself, but the words felt hollow to him.

“Really? I figure they could make it work, so long as they all lived incognito.”

Natsuki had said something like that, too. Without sight like Yuichi’s, who would ever know?

“Well, it’s probably nothing to worry about. As long as you don’t tell anyone what you’re seeing, the people hiding their identities won’t have any reason to come after you!”

Yuichi was stunned into silence. Natsuki had already come after him, and she knew about Soul Reader...

“What’s wrong?”

“Oh, nothing. Got it. I won’t tell anyone.”

Yuichi headed back to his room.

It was a long time before he got back to sleep.

A few days had passed since that first day at school.

Yuichi had come to class, as usual.

He looked around the desks. The labels were still the same.

"Dating Sim Protagonist" and "Dating Sim Childhood Friend" were joined at the hip, as usual. "Serial Killer," "Vampire," and "Fake" were giggling about something. "Anthromorph," the rich girl, was being fawned on by the groupies that had already clustered to her. The unsettling "Witch" was gazing at "Witch's Beloved."

Yuichi's initial panic at the thought of being dragged into something incredible had eased as his days settled into routine. In other words, nothing had happened. No suspicious incidents at all.

"Serial Killer" Natsuki Takeuchi hadn't come after him, and they hadn't interacted beyond the superficial pleasantries expected of classmates. Their relationship was nothing more than that.

"Vampire," "Zombie," and "Anthromorph" seemed to just be ordinary students, too.

Their strange natures were obvious to Yuichi's sight, but apparently not to each other. Even if they were, the policy seemed to be "live and let live."

So I get to be the only one living in fear of a serial killer, huh?

It was absurd. Everything was at peace around him, but because he couldn't stop seeing the labels, he couldn't not think about it.

Shota came up to him while he was lost in thought. "Hey, your big sister's super cute!" His voice strained with excitement. He must have seen Mutsuko when she and Yuichi were walking to school together.

"Yeah, people do say that about her." But before Yuichi could add that he couldn't really be objective on the subject, he felt someone watching him.

He glanced over at the seat to the left and in front of him. The gaze belonged to "Witch," An Katagiri. It pierced eerily between the gaps in her long bangs. She hadn't tried anything on him, but having her stare at him like that from time to time still sent a shiver up his spine.

Give me a break already! I'm having enough trouble with the serial killer!

Fortunately (well, for him), her attention was usually focused on Takuro in the seat next to hers. Yuichi broke from her gaze and looked ahead again.

He wanted to help Takuro, but he was worried that interfering might just cause more trouble. And anyway, she wasn't doing anything all that awful to him that Yuichi could see. All she did was stare at him, occasionally talk to him, and bring him boxed lunches.

Yuichi had occasionally glanced into the lunches to see if there was anything suspicions in them, but no. No roast newt or roots carved to look like people. Just your standard handmade lunches. So for now, he would just watch and wait.

Of course, if Takuro were ever in real danger, he would try to intervene... but for now, this was between the two "lovebirds." There was nothing he could do to stop it.

"Hey... What's *with* that chick?" Shota whispered to Yuichi,

apparently noticing An's creepy gaze as well.

"How should I know?" He felt the same way, but that didn't make it any easier to answer.

After class, Yuichi visited the roof, and gazed down at the courtyard between the four school buildings, deep in thought. The sight of it calmed him for some reason. Maybe it was all the greenery.

People didn't go to the roof very often, so it was a perfect place to have a nice, quiet think. And as always, the object of his thoughts was Natsuki Takeuchi.

She had said she wouldn't kill people she knew, but she had also said she killed people on a daily basis. What if she had killed someone recently?

He wasn't the most righteous guy, but it didn't seem right to let that stand.

She had said that if her identity ever got out, she'd kill everybody and run off. So what if it got out in some other way? He'd need a countermeasure in mind in case that came up.

But the real question is... how do you stop a serial killer?

If she were just a normal high school girl, he could probably beat her in a fight. But there was clearly more to her than that.

The day after she had jumped out the window, he had inspected the wall outside the bathroom. There had been a long gouge in it, leading from the window to the ground. She must have stuck something into the wall to slow her descent. No normal high school girl could do that.

He couldn't see the whole picture. She'd stuck him in the back with a blade of some kind, so he assumed her preferred weapon was a knife, but it could be something else.

Maybe I should have told Mutsuko about this...

One of his classmates was a serial killer. What would Mutsuko say if he told her that?

Well, she would grin and ask a million questions, of course. And it was obvious what would follow: She'd want him to fight the serial killer.

He didn't want to do that. Still, keeping it all to himself was hard. He wanted a confidant.

He pondered over who the ideal confidant would be. Someone tight-lipped, with the power to fight the serial killer if it came to it.

As if someone like that is just going to drop into my lap...

Yuichi sighed.

Who would even believe that there was a serial killer in their class? No one except his big sister.

Yuichi's thoughts kept going around in circles.

Just then, he noticed a label hovering in the courtyard.

It read "Vampire." It was moving. He'd never seen a label move around on its own.

He strained his eyes until he could make out a blurry form beneath the label, which he eventually realized was a person. More specifically, a girl.

It must be Aiko Noro, he realized. The girl from his class.

It was hard to tell what she was doing at this distance, but there was something strange about it. She seemed to be running circles around the courtyard. At first he assumed she was training, but realized that would be an odd thing for her to do in her school uniform. There was also a strangely desperate air about her.

What's going on here?

Yuichi pulled a pair of binoculars out of his bag. They were military binoculars with a night-vision setting, and he wasn't carrying them around by choice. They were another thing Mutsuko had pressed on him.

He used the binoculars to get a closer look.

Aiko's face was twisted with fear. She kept glancing behind herself as if she were being chased, although Yuichi couldn't see anything behind her.

Suddenly, something caught her leg, and she fell. A pool of blood began to spread around her.

"Huh?!" Yuichi seized his bag and broke out into a run.

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Aiko lay on the ground, screaming in pain.

Blood was pouring from her inner thigh and pooling on the ground.

A skeleton dressed in tattered clothing was pulling itself up from the earth below. Its hand was stained with blood. It must have been what had cut her.

School was over. She was out in the courtyard, being attacked by a skeleton monster. It was only late afternoon, yet the sky was pitch black. The powerful unreality of the situation only added to her feeling of helplessness.

I've got to get away.

She couldn't even stand, yet she tried with all her might to get her distance.

VAMPIRE
!!

Another strike like that would kill her. But for some reason, the attack didn't come.

Maybe she was safe? She looked up again, hopefully.

The skeletons were there. There were four of them: the one that had just come out of the ground, and the three that had been chasing her around. They did nothing but stand there, gazing at Aiko with their empty eye sockets.

A boy a year or two older than her was standing behind them.

He was as white as a sheet, and for some reason, he seemed afraid. Perhaps it had been the sight of the blood pouring out of her.

"Wh-What's going on here? This wasn't the deal! Explain this!" the boy shouted angrily to the black kitten on his shoulder. The kitten meowed in response, the sound seeming completely out of place in the situation.

"Is it possible she's just human? But that means..."

Their eyes met for a moment, in which she implored him silently to stop.

But that gesture only restored his bravado. He had noticed that her eyes had turned red.

"Ah-ha! I see. So you really aren't human! Well? Are you about to give me all you've got?"

But she wasn't about to give anything. She hadn't turned her eyes red intentionally. It didn't signify some sudden rush of power. It was just her vampiric regeneration activating to stop the loss of blood.

Aiko was terrified. Someone was about to kill her for reasons she didn't understand. It was like a nightmare, and all she wanted to do was wake up.

The boy's hesitation had fallen away, and the sheer malice in his eyes caused her to freeze up. There was no way out. She didn't know how to use her vampire powers. It was too much to hope that they would just awaken miraculously.

"Monsters are monsters. They should all return to dust. Don't you agree?"

At his word, the skeletons surrounded Aiko. Their hands formed into blades. There really was no way out this time.

Aiko shut her eyes tightly. She couldn't face death bravely. She didn't want to die.

But what came next was not the shock of being run through. Someone wrapped an arm around her waist, lifted her up, and was carrying her.

Aiko slowly opened her eyes, tilted her head, and looked up.

It was a boy. He was holding a bag on one arm, and her on the other.

*****

Yuichi leaped to Aiko's side, hefted her up with one arm, and started running.

"What's going on here?"

The blackened sky. The bizarre creatures attacking Aiko. None of it made any sense. But his main focus for now was getting away. Aiko was injured. He had to get her to safety before he could process the rest.

He thought that running straight would take him right into the school building, but the next thing he knew, he was heading back for the center of the courtyard.

So that's what it was.

That explained why Aiko had seemed to be running circles around the courtyard. She had been trying to escape, but couldn't.

Yuichi stopped.

In the darkness of the courtyard stood four skeletons dressed in tattered rags. They were frozen, and their hands, like blades, stuck into the ground.

They sure didn't look like cosplayers. They were fully capable of standing, despite having no muscles or tendons holding their bones together. The joints weren't even connected. There was clearly something supernatural at work here.

Behind the skeletons stood a boy in a school uniform. He had long bangs that hid his face, fingerless black gloves on both hands, and a black kitten on his shoulder.

Who is that guy? he wondered. But he didn't have to wonder long.

"Apprentice Monster Hunter."

That was the label above the boy's head, a label that Yuichi had never seen before. The "Apprentice Monster Hunter" was pursuing Aiko, the "Vampire." There was a certain natural logic to that.

What do I do? I can't leave Noro like this, but if they try something else...

"Impossible... How did you get here? I erected a barrier... humans shouldn't be able to get in..."

As Yuichi was lost in his thoughts, the boy began speaking to the kitten on his shoulder.

"Withdraw?! Why? ...Dammit! Fine!" The boy cursed in frustration, then fled into the school building as fast as his legs could carry him.

Yuichi watched him leave in bafflement, but eventually decided to lay Aiko down on the ground to check on her.

Aiko slowly looked up at him with unfocused red eyes.

Huh? He shook off his shock. This was no time to be distracted by the color of her eyes. Aiko's face was pale and covered in cold sweat. Her breathing was irregular. The words "hypovolemic shock" came to mind.

She was bleeding from her inner thigh. The rate of loss suggested damage to the femoral artery.

Luckily, Yuichi had a tourniquet in his bag, and some rudimentary

first-aid knowledge.

He lifted Aiko's skirt.

"Hey! What are you doing?" Aiko broke out of her daze with a squeal of panic.

"Stopping the bleeding. I need to focus, so please be quiet for a minute."

He checked the injury. The wound struck him as too large to apply pressure directly, yet for some reason, the bleeding seemed to be slowing. That was strange, but Yuichi continued his work nevertheless, tying the tourniquet to where her leg met her hip.

The next thing he knew, the dark sky had turned bright again.

"Well, that should do it. Are you okay, Noro?"

The sudden darkening and brightening of the sky was definitely strange, but at least the danger seemed to have passed.

"It's Sakaki... right?" she asked, as if to confirm. He suddenly remembered that they had never had a proper conversation before.

"Yeah, that's me. You're Noro, right? What happened here?"

"Um... Sorry. I'm not sure, either." Aiko suddenly started trembling as the terrifying experience began replaying in her mind.

Yuichi wanted to give Aiko time to calm down, but he knew they couldn't wait too long. He had to get a doctor for Aiko's injuries. Once she seemed stable enough, he spoke.

"Ready to move? We need to get to the hospital. That injury looks really bad... does it hurt?"

Yuichi suddenly realized something else was odd — Aiko was acting more or less normally. A wound like that should have hurt a lot, right? But Aiko seemed completely at ease.

"Huh? Y-Yeah, of course it hurts. Y-Yeah, a hospital! Yeah! Let's go to a hospital!" Aiko picked herself up, then turned her face away to keep him from meeting her eyes.

Yuichi flipped her skirt up again to see if he should loosen the tourniquet. It wasn't good to leave it tightened for too long.

"Hey... you really don't mind flipping up my skirt, do you?" she demanded.

Yuichi acted with no time for hesitation or embarrassment. "That's where you're injured. What else am I supposed to do?" He was just thinking he should be writing down the time he first applied the tourniquet, when he was jolted out of his thoughts by the renewed sight of her injury. The wound was almost completely closed.

"Noro... what's going on?"

It was clearly unnatural. Not even a minor scratch would heal this fast.

"Um..." Aiko averted her eyes from his. Her complexion had returned to normal, and her breathing had stabilized. She had completely recovered.

After a moment's reflection, Yuichi remembered his earlier glimpse of her eyes. They were the color of blood. They were back to their usual sepia now, but he was sure he had seen them. It would have been hard to forget something that shocking.

So she really is...

"I guess you don't need to go to that hospital, after all."

"Yeah, looks like it, huh? Guess it's already healed... Oh! But those weird things are still around!" Aiko quickly changed the subject, pointing behind Yuichi.

"Huh? ...Yeah, what are those things?"

The four skeletons were still standing there. There was no more air of malice about them. With their master gone, they appeared to have gone on standby.

"Are they ghosts or something?"

"You think we can just leave them here?"

"I don't know. They might not go away..."

It would probably be bad if someone found them. Yuichi rummaged through his bag and pulled out a small bottle. He carried it up to a skeleton and sprinkled its contents onto it.

"...No real effect."

"What is that?"

"Holy water... apparently. Well, maybe it only works if you're a Christian."

He thought about knocking one over, but they were so filthy, his mind rebelled at the thought of touching them.

"Hmm, what else could I try...? A... va... lo... ki... te... sva... ra... Bo... dhi... satt... va... when... prac... tic... ing... deep... ly..." Yuichi began reciting the Heart Sutra. Maybe they were lost spirits that needed to move on or something like that.

"Eek!"

He turned to face the scream behind him and noticed Aiko cringing.

"Huh?"

"Hey! What are you doing?" Aiko marched over to Yuichi, suddenly enraged.

"What am I... oh. Do vampires hate sutras or something? Sorry."

Aiko suddenly froze.

"Ah." Yuichi suddenly realized he'd thrown the word "vampire" out there completely casually. *What am I, stupid?! First I have a serial killer on my case, and now there'll be a vampire!*

"Wh-Wh-Wh-What did you say?!" Aiko was clearly in a panic.

"Huh? G-Good question! What *did* I say?"

Unlike Natsuki Takeuchi, she didn't seem like the type to threaten him for learning her identity, so he tried to see how far he could get by playing dumb.

"R-Really? Maybe I just misheard! Ahahaha! W-Well, I'm gonna get

going!" She turned, as if getting ready to leave.

"Wait a minute!"

"Wh-What?"

"You're just gonna walk home like that?"

Aiko was in a gruesome way. She was covered in blood from head to toe.

"Oh... no..." Aiko sagged pitifully as she realized the state she was in.

"Here, put this over it." Yuichi took off his blazer and offered it to Aiko. Having something to cover it helped, at least.

"U-Um, thanks."

"Could I at least take you to the nurse's office? They might have a change of clothes there."

"I don't know... if the nurse sees me..." Aiko didn't seem happy about the idea.

"Then... how about stopping by my place? It's close by, and you can borrow something from my sister."

"N-No, that's okay. My house isn't that far away. Thanks for lending me the jacket. I'll wash it and give it back to you!"

Aiko started to walk away again, but just before she got inside, she stopped, did an about-face, and approached Yuichi.

"Hey."

"What is it?"

"You really did say vampire, didn't you?"

"...Did I? Are you sure that's what I said?" Yuichi tried his excuse again. He had assumed they would both prefer to pretend like nothing happened, but it seemed Aiko disagreed.

"Yeah, I heard it. Now that I think about it, I can't just let that slide! Why did you say that? What made you think 'vampire'?"

Yuichi realized it was futile, so he just decided to admit to it. "Well, your wound healed so quickly..."

"Erk!"

"Your eyes were red..."

"...B-But is that really a reason to call someone a vampire?"

"I know. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have called you a vampire just because of that. I regret saying it, and I won't tell anyone what happened here today. Is that good enough?"

"No, it's not. ...Could I come by your house, after all? I think we need to talk."

Clearer reflection must have made Aiko realize the holes in Yuichi's story.

And so, they headed for his house together.

Chapter 3: Let's Visit Sakaki's House

Yuichi picked the least populated route to walk home.

He cast a glance at Aiko, who was walking next to him. Yuichi's blazer was managing to conceal most of the blood staining her uniform. It couldn't hide it all, but at least it was better than nothing.

Aiko, noticing him looking her way, spoke up. "Hey..."

"What's wrong?"

"Huh? Um, I was wondering... Are you really strong? Do you do sports or something?" Her cheeks took on a faint pink tinge. She was probably referring to the fact that he'd managed to carry her with one arm.

"Nah, I don't play sports."

She hummed thoughtfully for a moment, then spoke again. "Hey. Do you just carry stuff like holy water and tourniquets around with you?" Her incredulity was only natural. Not many high school students walked around with those sorts of things.

"It's kind of my big sister's hobby. She makes me carry that stuff around. She's all, 'What if you get caught in an earthquake? What if demons attack you?' That kinda stuff."

"Huh?"

Again, he couldn't blame her for her response. It definitely sounded absurd when he said it aloud. He suddenly wished he hadn't.

"Okay, yeah, I understand how you feel. I felt the same way... but after seeing something like that in real life... maybe my sister had a point."

He thought back on the skeletons in their tattered clothing. It was harder to make fun of his sister's hobbies after what I'd just seen.

The skeletons hadn't disappeared on their own, so they'd hidden them in the bushes. Yuichi had wanted to avoid any kind of panic that might result from their discovery.

"But it didn't work, did it?"

"Well, the 'holy water' was probably just regular water. If we sprinkled it on you—" Before Yuichi could complete his thought, he was met by a glare from Aiko. Yuichi closed his mouth, realizing how thoughtless he was being.

"Sorry. We can talk about that back at my house."

They arrived there not long afterwards.

*****

Yuichi's house was two stories tall, with a lawn. It was covered in stylish white trim, and had probably been built during the imported housing trend. It wasn't big enough to be called a mansion, but it suggested a certain degree of class among its residents.

"I'm home!" Yuichi called.

"I'm visiting..." Aiko added.

Yuichi passed through the door, and Aiko followed him.

A woman with a carefree air about her poked her head into the front hall.

Does Sakaki take after his mother? Aiko wondered. That was her first impression. She was beautiful, the kind of woman who never seemed to age. Aiko hadn't met Yuichi's father, but it was easy to imagine that he had inherited a lot of his mother's beauty.

"Welcome home. Oh? Did you bring a friend?" She seemed surprised by the sudden visitor.

"Yeah. This is Noro."

"Aiko Noro. A pleasure to meet you."

"Yu doesn't bring girls home very often. It's a pleasure to meet you. Be a good friend to him, now."

"Y-Yes ma'am," Aiko said. Whether they could be friends was a dicey question at the moment, though. They had only talked for the first time today.

"Mind if Noro washes up? She got a bucket of paint spilled on her. It's kind of a mess."

"Oh, dear. Just wait, I'll get things set up right away." Yuichi's mother hurried down the hallway.

"You mean she just believed that?" Aiko was dumbfounded. She would have had a million questions about a story like that.

"Mom's not the type to sweat the details. I'll get you a change of clothes. Just come with me." Yuichi climbed to the second floor and showed Aiko to his sister's room.

The sight stopped Aiko dead in her tracks. It was full of piles of things... Things she didn't even have names for. She got a vague sense that there was a method to the madness, but it still seemed like a random scattering of junk.

Yuichi tromped into the room and began fishing through the closet.

"Um, they should be around here... There they are!" He came out with a random set of panties, bra, skirt, and shirt.

"Huh? Wait a minute. What are you doing?!" The sight before her was incomprehensible. A boy was rooting through his sister's clothing, pulling out underwear like it was nothing.

"What do you think? I'm looking for something you can wear."

"Hey... Do you even realize what you've got in your hand?"

Yuichi gazed over at the item he was holding: his big sister's bra. "Oh! Sorry. She is pretty flat. I guess it wouldn't fit you, huh?"

Yuichi eyed Aiko's chest as he said it. She crossed her arms reflexively and glared at him.

"Okay, you can borrow my little sister's clothes," he said. "They'll probably fit you better."

Yuichi shrugged off Aiko's glare, and left his big sister's room to head for his little sister's.

Aiko followed him hesitantly. She could feel her own expression becoming strained.

Yuichi was waiting before the door. There was a plate on the door that read "YUICHI."

So he was kidding about lending me his little sister's clothing, then? But I'm not sure I want to borrow Sakaki's clothes...

Yuichi stepped inside his room and beckoned Aiko to follow him.

There was a girl inside. She was taking off her school uniform.

"Huh?! Huh? What's going on? Huh? Why? Isn't this your room...?!" Aiko checked the plate on the door again. It did, indeed, say YUICHI. But written in right beneath it, in smaller letters, was the word YORIKO.

"Hey, Yori. I see you're back. Oh, this is my little sister, Yoriko." Yuichi pointed to the undressing girl.

"Thanks, big brother. Huh? ...A girl?" Yoriko's eyes opened wide at the sight of Aiko.

"Yeah, I brought a friend. Her name's Noro. Her clothes got dirty. Could you lend her your uniform?"

"Sure. Hang on a minute." Yoriko stripped completely down to her underwear, then changed into her street clothes.

"Why is your little sister changing in here?!"

"Because... this is her room, too."

"Huh? That makes no sense! What? Your big sister's room is next door, right? Shouldn't the sisters share a room?!"

His little sister's body was clearly well-developed, in the feminine sense. Most people would consider it unacceptable for a brother and sister to share a room at their age.

"Some families would do that. But there are only two kids' bedrooms, and Mutsuko's the oldest, so she gets a room to herself."

"Huh? What? And you're okay with that? Are *you,* Yori?" Aiko's head spun with questions.

Yoriko's response was to march straight up to Aiko and lead her out into the hall.

Once it was just the two of them, she shut the door behind her. Whatever she had to say, she didn't want Yuichi hearing it.

"Your name is Noro, I believe. Would it be correct to assume that you are dating my brother?" Yoriko leaned in close, her expression dead serious. Her voice had also softened to give her words extra weight. Her

face was very pretty, like their mother's.

"Huh? Oh, um, no, we're not dating. Actually, today was the first time we ever talked," Aiko stammered, feeling strangely pressured.

MY LITTLE SISTER

This girl seemed curiously mature for a middle school student.

“I see... I’m very glad to hear that. It is clear, then, that my brother is merely attempting to aid a person in need. Now then, Noro. Because you are his friend, allow me to offer a polite word of warning: You must not meddle in the affairs of this house.”

“Huh?”

“I am satisfied with the way things are. I cannot have him questioning the acceptability of a brother and sister sharing a room. Do you understand?”

“No, I fear I don’t.” Aiko found herself adopting a slightly strange form of formal speech. “Because... I mean, really! Who even does that?!”

“We do, here in this house. Are you unaware that it is rude to pass judgment on how others live their lives?”

Aiko couldn’t think of a response to that. She certainly did find it strange, but if Yoriko didn’t mind, there wasn’t much she could say. It just left her with a nagging sense of wrongness.

“Now, I believe you require a change of clothes. Very well. I shall lend you some. It will be a new pair, which I have not yet worn. Knowing my brother, he will have neglected to take such a consideration into account.”

“Oh, yeah, he tried to lend me his big sister’s underwear...”

“Now we shall return to the room. You will refrain from mentioning the contents of our discussion to him.”

“R-Right.”

Yoriko had dominated the conversation. Aiko couldn’t do anything but follow her lead.

Yoriko opened the door and re-entered the room.

“What were you two up to out there?” Yuichi asked, looking at them both in confusion.

“Aw, sorry, Big Brother. It was just a bit of girl talk! Right?”

“Huh? R-Right...” Aiko stammered her startled agreement.

“Hmm. Well, that’s cool. Pick out what you’re lending her quickly, okay? She probably feels pretty gross, standing around the way she is.”

“Okaaay!” Yoriko’s attitude had done a total 180. The formal coldness from before had vanished. She seemed like any innocent young girl of her age.

What’s with these siblings?

Aiko stared at her, dumbfounded, as Yoriko went to pick out clothes.

*****

Yuichi was waiting at the low table when Aiko came in.

Now that all the blood was washed off and she had changed into Yoriko’s clothing, she looked completely refreshed.

She sat down across from him.

Yoriko had gone downstairs out of consideration, leaving Yuichi and Aiko alone in the room together.

“Okay. Now, please tell me. What made you think I was a vampire? I know you thought it was strange that my wound healed so fast, but why the leap to ‘vampire’? Did you already know what I am? If so, how?”

“You have to promise not to tell anyone. In exchange, I won’t tell anyone about you. Is that okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. The reason I knew you were a vampire... is because one day, out of nowhere, I started seeing labels above people’s heads. They seem to reveal something about the person... and your label said ‘Vampire.’”

“Huh?” Aiko’s jaw fell slack.

Clearly that hadn’t been an answer she’d expected.

“I know you probably don’t believe me, but why would I make something like this up?”

“Well... I guess I’ll believe you for now. So you didn’t hear it from someone else? Nobody else knows?”

“Yeah, I was totally basing it on the label. And I haven’t told anyone else that you’re a vampire. I mentioned that there was a vampire in my class when I told my big sister about my sight, but I didn’t tell her who it was.”

“Oh, okay. That’s good, then... Just to be clear, it’s a secret, okay? Don’t tell anyone.” Aiko looked reassured, despite giving the warning.

“I won’t tell anyone. I really don’t like trouble.”

“But... then why did you save me, if you don’t like trouble?”

“You can’t just abandon someone who’s injured, you know? Speaking of which, why was that guy even after you, anyway?”

“I’m not sure myself... I found a letter in my shoe cubby. It said, ‘I want to talk to you about something important.’ It was from a guy named Hiromichi Rokuhara in Class 2-A. I wasn’t sure how to take being invited out by someone I’d never met before, but he is an upperclassman, so it seemed rude not to go. But when I saw him out in the courtyard, the sky suddenly got dark, and those skeleton things came after me.”

“Who was that guy? What was he trying to do?”

“He called me a monster. He said he was going to exterminate me...” Aiko’s voice turned hollow as she remembered the terror of that moment.

“...Hey, does that mean this Rokuhara guy knows what you are, too?”

“I swear, I haven’t done anything to tip anyone off! I’m almost exactly like a human! Sometimes even *I* forget I’m a vampire!”

“His label was ‘Apprentice Monster Hunter.’ You know anything about that? Like, maybe vampire hunters have the power to see your

true identity."

"I've heard people like that exist, but I don't think they've ever come after our family, so it can't be that easy to see through."

"But the fact of the matter is, a monster hunter has his sights on you. You'll have to be careful from now on."

"...What should I do? Dad's gonna be really mad if he finds out someone knows what I am."

Aiko looked despondent. Her father must be a scary guy.

"But if he's a monster hunter, he probably wouldn't want to get humans involved. That means you want to stay in crowds as much as possible, I think."

"You think he won't do anything if there are humans around?"

"I think so. I bet that's the reason he ran away after I showed up."

"But I really don't understand... Even if I am a vampire, it would still cause a huge commotion if I died..."

Yuichi agreed on that one. Aiko wasn't just a monster lurking in the shadows. If she died or went missing, it would be big news.

"So, I can't figure out what was going through his head. But either way..." Yuichi leaned forward over the table a little.

"...I'll still keep your secret, Noro. In exchange... will you be my confidant? I've got a lot on my mind, with my sight the way it is. You know?"

Yuichi gazed earnestly into Aiko's eyes. He needed a confidant that would keep his secrets. An incognito vampire would be perfect for the job.

"Okay. You got me out of a pretty bad scrape back there, so it's the least I can do. I can't do much more than listen, though."

"You mean it? Wow, I thought you'd say no! Which of course I'd be okay with, but still... Man, that's so great. You're such a nice person, Noro!"

"Huh? A-Am I, really?" His earnest flattery had caused her cheeks to turn pink. Perhaps she enjoyed it.

"Anyway. To cut to the chase, there's one major thing on my mind."

"Right."

"There's a serial killer in our class."

"Huh?"

"She knows that I know who she is."

"Huh?!"

"Carrying the burden by myself all this time has been so hard, I've been looking for someone to confide in. Anyway, the person is—"

"Wait! I don't want to know! Don't say any more!" Aiko shouted. This didn't seem to be where she expected the subject to lead at all.

"It's Natsuki Takeuchi."

Aiko slumped in defeat for a moment, but immediately bounced back, rising to her feet to give him a piece of her mind. "What the

heck?! That's horrible! I didn't think that was what you'd want to talk about!"

"You said you'd hear me out! That's the thing that's really been worrying me, so what else was I going to talk about? She said that if word got out, she'd kill everyone in the school! There's no way I can keep something like that all on myself!" Yuichi fired back. He was uncowed by her vehemence.

"Hey! Keep it down!" she hissed. "You don't want anyone to find out, right?"

"Oh... right. Um, sorry." Yuichi's apology was sincere. He really had gone too far.

Aiko didn't seem to be able to maintain her anger in the face of that. Slowly, she sat down.

"...Fine. I did say I'd listen, after all. And there's no putting the cat back in the bag. Ah! Just don't tell me about anyone else unless you have to, okay? I don't want to hear more than that!"

"Thanks. So, anyway... you said you couldn't do much more than listen, but I still figured I would ask. Can you fight, Noro?"

"Huh? Fight?"

"You know, knowing you had some kind of vampire power that could take down a serial killer would be a huge load off my mind."

Vampires in fiction tended to be powerful creatures, after all. If she had any of that, it could make her a valuable ally in combat.

"No way. I'm really not all that different from a human. All I do is heal a little faster."

"Huh? You can't turn into a bat or mist or make more of your kind by sucking their blood?"

"Nope. Oh, and while we're at it: I'm visible in mirrors, I can cross running water, and I can enter people's houses without being invited."

"How exactly are you a vampire?"

"It's not like I asked to be a vampire!"

"Good point. Sorry."

"Anyway, if I were that good, I'd just protect my secret by sucking your blood and making you my thrall. Did you even consider that?"

"Ah." Yuichi hadn't considered that, no. "I guess you just didn't seem like the dangerous type. Takeuchi has kind of a threatening aura about her... Though that may be my own bias speaking." The first thing he'd noticed about her was her serial killer label, and she'd threatened him immediately after that. He couldn't view her objectively. Everything she did seemed suspicious to him.

"Well, that's okay. Anyway, I don't have any of the typical vampire powers or weak points. If I did, I wouldn't be able to go to school."

"But you can't stand sutras and stuff, right? Doesn't that make things tough for you?"

"Not at all. I mean, I don't really run into much Buddhist stuff in my

day-to-day life. And I can stand the sutras as long as I steel myself."

That wasn't what he'd expected at all, and maybe that showed through on his face. Aiko's manner turned defensive.

"You don't seem to believe me. Look, I'm Japanese, so I don't care about crosses, which is why they're not a weak point for me. Crosses and holy water only work if the vampire believes they're sacred. So those only work on vampires from Christian cultures."

"Is that how that works?"

"Yeah. So an atheist vampire wouldn't have any religious weaknesses, see?"

"Huh. So wouldn't it be to all vampires' benefit not to believe in a god?"

"My grandfather's French. Apparently people over there can't imagine being atheists."

"Ah, that explains that."

"Explains what?"

"You seemed kind of cute in a French sort of way. I guess it's because of your grandfather." Being a quarter French would explain it.

"Huh? Um, well, er... A-Anyway, like I said, I hardly have any vampire powers at all! Um, though apparently feelings of guilt play a big role in the way the powers work!"

Aiko was clearly flustered, but Yuichi didn't mind. He spoke up. "That's not what I was expecting... Hey, you said you don't suck blood, right?"

"Ugh, do you really have to ask?"

"Huh? Should I not have? You don't have to answer if you don't want to."

"Well, it is a little awkward, but... I actually cook the blood up and mix it into my food. Fresh blood is gross and stinky. I can't do it."

"And it's human blood?"

"Yeah. But I don't attack people or anything. We use blood drawn for transfusions. Our family runs a hospital, see. You know Noro General Hospital?"

"Huh? That's your family's hospital?" Noro General Hospital. It was the central hospital of the region. Everybody knew it. It was known as an enormous hospital with over a thousand beds.

"Yes."

"And everyone in your family is a vampire?"

"Yeah. It's hereditary."

It sounded like she didn't have any combat skills. Too bad. If any fighting was going to happen, Yuichi was going to have to do it himself.

He'd finally found an ally, but he was still far from resolving anything.

*****

Before that day, Aiko had barely even noticed the boy named Yuichi.

He had a handful of male friends he spoke to in class, and he'd never seemed interested in getting to know anyone other than them. Aiko couldn't ever remember even speaking to him.

He was fairly good-looking, so the girls talked about him a fair amount, but he seemed cold and aloof, which gave others a bad impression of him. Because of that, the girls' interest in him had dwindled.

But talking to him today was helping her realize why he acted that way. He was seeing all kinds of bizarre labels over people's heads. He was evasive because he was afraid of getting involved in someone else's circumstances. Now that they were talking, he didn't seem cold at all. He spoke with candor and openness about whatever was on his mind.

Learning that Aiko was a vampire didn't frighten him, and he didn't find her strange. He spoke to her like he would anyone else. Aiko had always been a little ashamed of her nature, so seeing Yuichi accept it so naturally made her feel a little better about herself.

He is a bit strange, though. Especially in the big picture, his relationship with his sisters...

Even if they were family, she couldn't understand how nonplussed he was about sharing a room with a girl in middle school.

And outing Takeuchi's secret like that was pretty cruel.

But she could let a few little oddities slide when it came to the man to whom she owed her life. Aiko couldn't offer him much, so being his confidant felt like the least she could do.

"Hey. I know I've confided a lot in you, but if you have any problems, you can talk to me, too. Does being a vampire make any trouble for you?" Yuichi inquired, interrupting Aiko's thoughts.

Maybe he was feeling sorry about pushing the Natsuki thing on her.

"Trouble from being a vampire? It doesn't really make trouble for me in my daily life. If there's anything that's worrying me, it's..." Aiko stopped, remembering. She was having one small problem, though she wasn't sure if she should confide in Yuichi.

"What is it?"

"It's about my big brother... Um, are you familiar with middle school syndrome?"

"...Yeah, I've had some experience with it." Yuichi winced and smiled.

"My big brother has it."

"Everyone's got hobbies, right? As long as he's not making trouble for people..."

"I think... he might start making trouble, though. He talks about being from an ancient clan that controlled the power of darkness, and being a true vampire... and conquering the world and stuff."

"Oh, *that* kind of middle school syndrome?" Yuichi looked surprised.

“Huh? What do you mean, ‘that kind’?”

Were there multiple types of middle school syndrome? Aiko had only learned the term recently herself.

“...Oh, there are lots of kinds of middle school syndrome. The term was originally used to refer to how kids in their second year of middle school suddenly tried to act all mature. But it branched out into a few different meanings from there. Lately, it’s come to refer to people who believe they have secret powers or something. That’s what you’re talking about, right?”

“Yeah. I wouldn’t go so far as to say I want to make him normal again, or anything like that. But I do want to make sure he doesn’t make any trouble for anyone.”

If he did make any trouble, the family elders would act to rein in the situation, and then her brother would probably get punished. Of course, he’d be getting what he deserved, but she would still prefer to stop him before it got to that point.

“Got it. I’ll help you figure out what to do about your brother,” Yuichi said forcefully.

“Okay! Then it’s a deal! I’ll help you with your sight, and you help me with my brother. Right?” Aiko offered her hand out to Yuichi.

“Huh? What?”

“We shake hands now! That’s how a contract works, right?”

“What are we, Americans?” Even so, Yuichi took her hand. Aiko found it rough and strong.

“And... I know it’s a bit late, but I should still say it. Thank you for saving me.” Aiko smiled brightly.

Chapter 4: Familiars and Barriers and Auras and Monsters and a Monster Hunter Society

It was the next day.

Yuichi had walked to school with Aiko. They still weren't sure why Aiko had been attacked, so Yuichi was on his guard for a repeat of last time. Of course, he expected nothing was going to happen in the classroom with so many people around, and sure enough, the morning classes passed without incident.

Lunchtime rolled around.

Yuichi was eating with Shota when Aiko approached them. She casually pulled up an empty seat nearby, sat down, and opened up her lunch box.

Yuichi's desk was starting to feel a little crowded.

"Huh? Noro?" Shota said in surprise. Her approach had apparently been completely unexpected. The other boys around them seemed shocked, too. They were most likely thinking the same thing.

"What is it, Noro?" Yuichi asked.

Aiko leaned over to whisper in Yuichi's ear. "We need to act like friends, or it won't seem natural that we're hanging out all the time, right?"

"Huh, you think?" Yuichi responded in a whisper.

He couldn't figure out what was so bad about it not looking natural. Obviously, they'd have to be spending time together so that Aiko wouldn't have to be alone, but he couldn't figure out why it had to seem natural for them to do that.

"Well, aren't you two nice and cozy!" Shota said. He looked suspiciously at the two of them, sitting close and and whispering to each other.

"Ah, she wants to eat lunch with us," Yuichi answered. "Is that okay?"

"It's fine, but what, are you guys dating or something?" Shota sounded jealous.

Aiko looked flustered. She hadn't thought of a cover story, apparently. "No! Um, the truth is, I was passing by and caught sight of Sakaki helping my grandmother who was passed out on the street, and then Sakaki passed out too... I guess from sympathy pains... so I picked them both up and took them to our place... um, that is, the hospital we

run... A-And I was so moved by what he did, I was all, 'What are we, kindred spirits?' And that's how we became friends!" Aiko looked at Shota with upturned eyes. She'd tried to improvise the story on the spot, but it had devolved into nonsense somewhere around the middle.

"I see. You're amazing, Noro. You carried two people at once?"

Yuichi stared at Shota in disbelief. He didn't seem to doubt her story at all. *He seriously believed that?*

"Y-Yeah, she's really strong," Yuichi said in desperation. If Shota didn't doubt the story, he might as well back her up.

Aiko just glared at him. Even though it was her own story, she apparently didn't like being called "strong."

"Hey, let's eat lunch!" she said.

"Shota, sometimes I think you're just a really amazing person," Yuichi said. He meant every word.

"Huh, I am?"

The three of them resumed their lunch together. Yuichi was shoveling down his food, but Shota seemed to be struggling with the awkwardness. There was nothing for the three of them to talk about.

After sitting in discomfort for a while, Shota suddenly pointed at Yuichi. "Hey, Noro, did you know this guy carries around a ton of weird stuff?"

"Huh? Like what?" Aiko latched on to the subject eagerly, apparently hoping to dispel the awkwardness.

"Sakaki, show her what you've got in your pen case."

"Why?"

"Just do it!"

Shota didn't wait. He was sitting across from Yuichi, so he was in a position to reach into the bag himself. After a little rummaging, he pulled out a leather pen case. There was nothing special about the case itself, but it was stuffed so full, it was bursting at the seams. Shota undid the clasp and scattered the contents onto the desk.

"Hey!"

"Oh, chill."

"Don't tell me to chill!"

"See? Look!" Shota picked up a pen and showed it to Aiko.

"So what?" she asked, looking confused. She stared at the ordinary-looking pen.

"Sakaki, explain."

"No!"

"Fine. You notice anything weird about it?" Shota asked.

He handed her the pen, and she began to investigate.

"Weird..." she murmured to herself after playing with it for a while.

"Right? It's called a tactical pen. It's a weapon."

A tactical pen was indeed a pen that could be used as a weapon. It was designed for self-defense: heavy, and made from durable hard

plastic that could be stabbed into a joint or a vital point.

"Now, you see this on the back of the pen?"

"Yeah." She touched the protrusion that a person probably wouldn't notice unless they were holding it.

"That's a glass breaker. Apparently it's for breaking car windows."

In other words, Yuichi thought, *if you were trapped in a car, you could use a glass breaker to get away.* As a high school student, Yuichi didn't need one, but Mutsuko had still put it in because it was "totally awesome."

"Sakaki... why do you have these?" Aiko asked.

"It's my big sister! She just puts this stuff in there!" Yuichi cried.

Mutsuko had a tendency to pick out the strangest things and stuff them in his bag without asking. No matter how often he threw them out, she wouldn't stop, so he had eventually just given up.

"There's this one, too." Shota pulled out another pen. He pulled off the tip to reveal a sharp blade.

"Huh? A knife?"

"There's a knife attached to the cartridge. He says it's called a pen knife. He's got all kinds of weird stuff like that. I can't help but remember them."

Shota picked up another of the alleged pens. There was a clicking noise, and a flame lit up at the top of it.

"Huh?" Aiko let out a stunned noise.

Yuichi sympathized. He'd feel the same way if it were someone else's stuff.

"That one's called a pen lighter," Yuichi said. His pen case was full of such long, thin tools, all designed to look like pens.

"Where do you even buy this stuff, y'know?" Shota really seemed to be enjoying himself.

"Shut up! Leave me alone!" Yuichi responded in anguish.

"Sakaki... Don't get arrested, okay? Be careful, especially at night." Aiko sounded concerned for him.

Yuichi was at a loss for words. Being caught and questioned was his greatest fear. He always tried to avoid policemen when he could.

"You're the one who pulled them all out! Put them all back! Oh, be careful with that!"

Shota had obediently begun to return the materials to the pen case. But as he reached for the ruler, Yuichi reached out to stop him.

"That could cut you. It's sharpened on one side," he explained.

"Uh, that's a little too dangerous..."

One side of the steel ruler had been sharpened to a razor's edge. You could get hurt if you touched it unknowingly.

"My sister reads a lot of old manga. It's a bad influence on her."

"Just what the hell kind of manga is it? I've never heard of anything like this."

"...I've also got sharpened bike spokes and stuff..."

Shota was flabbergasted. "Sakaki, I think you need to have a good, long talk with your sister."

"I try, but it never works," Yuichi mumbled.

They finished their lunches, and Yuichi parted ways with Aiko and headed for the second-year classrooms by himself.

He went to 2-A. It was his sister Mutsuko's classroom. He opened the door and looked inside.

"Ah, Yu!" Mutsuko saw him immediately, although Yuichi hadn't actually come here to see her. "Were you lonely for your big sister? You just couldn't wait until after school, so you came to see me at lunch!" she cried out, delighted.

"That's not it!" Yuichi protested.

Mutsuko had a habit of monitoring anyone who entered and left a room. According to her, it was a survival technique; you had to always be watching to make sure no one suspicious got in.

The girls quickly gathered around. "Hey, what, that's your little brother? He's cute!"

"Hey! Don't butt in just because he's hot! He's mine!"

"No, I'm not yours, actually... um. Excuse me. Could I ask a question? Is there someone in this class named Rokuhara?"

"Rokuhara's right over there," someone said.

Yuichi pushed through the second-year girls to make it into the classroom. He walked around in front of a boy sitting at a desk in the middle of the room. The boy had his head on his desk, and his face was covered. But it was definitely him. The guy who'd attacked Noro.

"Hey. Could I talk to you for a minute?" Yuichi said.

The boy's face twisted in shock as he saw Yuichi. "Y-You're..."

The two of them headed for the courtyard. A number of students were there, eating lunch, but they avoided those students and headed for an isolated corner.

"Rokuhara. I was rather surprised to see you come to school like nothing happened..."

Hiromichi Rokuhara. Here in the light of day, he seemed somewhat on the timid side.

Yuichi was initially convinced that the name on the letter Aiko had mentioned would be a pseudonym, that her attacker might not even be a student at that school, which would make him harder to track down. This made the truth feel almost like an anticlimax.

"What do you want?" Rokuhara asked fearfully. Above his head was the word "Upperclassman." It had been "Apprentice Monster Hunter" the day before...

"Look, I've got some questions about what went down yesterday."

Yuichi decided to skip the politeness and get right to the intimidation. This guy had attacked Aiko. Why stand on formality?

"It has nothing to do with me anymore! I failed! So just leave me alone already!"

"Huh? ...Hang on a minute, here. What do you mean, you failed?"

"I couldn't slay a monster in time! It's crap! It's so wrong! I thought I'd get to leave this stupid world behind! I thought I was special!"

"How selfish can you get? You hurt Noro, you know. Aren't you even going to apologize?" Yuichi demanded, drawing closer to Rokuhara. This casual talk of killing people set his blood boiling.

"Who cares? She's a monster!"

"Shut the hell up! What the hell excuse is that?!"

Rokuhara sucked a short breath and cringed in the face of Yuichi's hostility.

Yuichi decided to swallow his rage for now. He had come to ask questions, after all. They wouldn't make any progress like this.

"I need to ask you about some things. Ready?" he asked.

"No! I don't have anything to say!" Rokuhara cried.

The guy was stonewalling. Realizing that he wouldn't buckle to threats, Yuichi tried a new tactic.

"...Look, my name's Yuichi Sakaki. I'm Mutsuko Sakaki's little brother."

"You're Sakaki's... little brother?"

"Yeah. If you won't talk to me, I'll just have to ask her for help."

"Okay, fine! I'll talk!"

Sis... what the hell are you doing in that class? Rokuhara's sudden attitude switch was a little alarming. He'd expected her to be causing trouble for her classmates, but not enough to provoke such a dramatic reaction.

"Why did you attack Noro?" Yuichi demanded, knowing that would be the first step to figuring out countermeasures.

"It was a test. To pass, I just had to slay one monster, any monster, by yesterday."

"What made you think Noro was a monster?"

"I can see it. Monsters have a black aura around them. I have a special power!"

What utter nonsense. Or so Yuichi would have thought, if it hadn't been for recent events. Now that he himself had special sight that tipped him off to the existence of vampires and serial killers, he couldn't dismiss it so easily.

"Hey, how long have you had that? Since you were born?"

"...Since the last day of spring vacation. That's the day they came to me and started up the test."

The same day I started seeing words? Someone else had started seeing strange things on the same day Yuichi had. There could be a connection.

"Who are 'they'? What was the test?"

"The Monster Hunter Society. If I'd passed the test, I could have joined them."

"Did they know about Noro?"

"I don't think so. The test was for me to find and slay a monster myself. I haven't had any contact with them since the test started."

"Okay, then. Don't tell anyone about Noro or about this society of yours."

"Yeah, I won't. Now that I failed, they're through with me. Bet I'll never see them again," Rokuhara said self-consciously.

"I've got a few more questions," Yuichi responded. "What was up with those skeletons? And what was up with the courtyard?" It was seeming like Rokuhara himself wasn't a threat anymore, but they might still have to deal with those mysterious phenomena again.

"The skeletons were familiars. I was borrowing them. A spellcaster can forge them out of dirt and order them around. Of course, I learned quickly enough that they weren't all that tough..."

Yuichi checked the underbrush that had hidden the skeletons yesterday. All that remained were mounds of earth. It seemed they had been made out of dirt, just as Rokuhara said.

"What about the courtyard?"

"I was getting to that! Chill! That was a barrier. Remember that kitten on my shoulder? It was a familiar that specialized in magical barriers. Barriers keep monsters sealed in, and you can't see what's going on in one from the outside."

Yuichi remembered his failed attempt to escape with Aiko. Maybe he would have been able to get out if he hadn't been carrying her. It could have been his special sight that had allowed him to see what was going on inside.

"What happened to the familiars? Are they still around somewhere?"

"Like I said, they weren't very tough. They got taken out in no time. Without any familiars, I couldn't fight. That was when I knew I'd failed." Rokuhara ground his teeth in frustration.

The mention of the familiars being "taken out" got Yuichi's attention.

"Was there another monster around here besides Noro?" As someone else who had been dragged into this world of non-humans, he probably ought to know.

"Yeah. It had a horn, so probably an oni. He was in this high-collared, button-up school uniform. Looked about our age. He had this really black, really sinister aura..."

"But he was a monster? How did you make it out alive after he beat you?"

Rokuhara laughed bitterly. "He said he didn't eat men! Let me go on gentlemanly principle. Dammit... Are we done yet? I'm sick of talking about this." Rokuhara moved to leave, but then he shot back one last

thought. “And don’t tell your sister about me!”

Familiars, barriers, auras, monsters, and a monster hunter society...

It was like one of Mutsuko’s fantasies come to life. Yuichi was sick of it already.

*****

“And that’s how it went down.”

Aiko had met up with Yuichi on the roof after class. She was leaning against the chain-link fence, staring up at the sky. Yuichi was beside her, doing the same.

“So it seems pretty unlikely that he’ll come after you again,” he finished.

“But it also sounds like... someone else might?” Aiko said. He’d mentioned a society of monster hunters. That meant someone else might try to attack her.

“Yeah, you might want to avoid being alone for a while.”

Yuichi had walked Aiko home the day before, and walked her to school that morning. He must have been really worried about her. She was grateful for the kindness.

“But I guess I can’t be with you all the time... If anything happens, give me a call,” Yuichi said. He pulled out his cell phone, and Aiko did the same. They exchanged numbers.

It’s weird how... Sakaki doesn’t seem bashful around women at all... she thought. Yuichi had taken her number as though it were nothing out of the ordinary.

“Monsters aside, what about Takeuchi? Are you doing anything in particular about her?”

“All I can do for now is keep an eye on her. Noro, have you heard of any grisly murders taking place in the area recently?”

“I don’t... think so.” She thought back on what she’d heard on the news lately. There had been no reports of murders or unexplained deaths that she could remember.

“Yeah, guess not. You think she really kills people?”

“Beats me. You’re the only person I know who thinks she’s a serial killer.” Aiko wasn’t fully convinced that Yuichi’s abilities were real, but she wasn’t planning on trying to confirm them. If the two of them looked deeper and it turned out to be true, they could end up making things even worse.

“Well, she did admit to it,” he said.

“Well, I wasn’t there. But, I mean, I do believe you saw what you say you saw.”

“Yeah, I hear you. There’s no proof or anything.”

This had been intended to be a strategy meeting, but they’d quickly run out of material.

"There's nothing we can do about my problem right away, so let's talk about your brother. Is he working on anything? Regarding his, um... world domination?"

"...He bought a black cape with red lining..." Aiko was embarrassed to even say the words. *Where had he even bought that, anyway?*

"Um, so he's the type who likes to get the look right first?"

"He was practicing flapping it in front of the mirror..."

"Look... maybe he'll be fine if we just let him be?"

"I'm starting to think you're right... At least, I'm starting to realize why you wanted someone to talk with. It feels a lot better than just turning it over and over in your own mind."

"No problem. I'm just glad I could help... I mean, it sounds like we both have family troubles."

Aiko was just about to offer her heartfelt agreement, when the door to the roof jerked open, and a female student rushed out of it.

She was slender, tall, and beautiful, her long hair held in place by a rack of hairpins. Those honestly seemed a little excessive to Aiko, but they did look good on her.

The girl saw Yuichi and walked straight toward him. "There you are, Yu! I told you to come to the club room!"

Yuichi met the girl's eyes with a sigh. "Sis... I was on my way, but..."

"Um, is this your big sister, Sakaki?" Aiko asked.

"Yeah," Yuichi admitted, with an air of resignation.

Aiko felt another blow to her self-confidence. It was a little galling just how beautiful both of his sisters were.

Mutsuko Sakaki. Yuichi's older sister. The one who filled his bag with all those bizarre tools...

"Huh? You're with a girl? ...Congrats! Don't worry, I won't get in your way. I know how it goes! Yeah, I just knew you'd get a girlfriend the minute you were in high school!"

"That's not it!"

"Forget about club today! You two go and be happy! This is the day's material, so just look over it in your own time, okay?"

Mutsuko shoved a thick packet at Yuichi. It looked like a photocopy of some kind of manual.

"Can't you just give that to me at home?" he protested. Aiko tried to sneak a peek, but Yuichi just handed it to her instead.

"Huh? Are you sure?" Aiko asked.

"I don't want it," Yuichi retorted.

Aiko didn't especially want it either, but now that she was holding it in her hands it was too late. She glanced through the packet. Every page was filled with diagrams and jargon.

"Huh? What is all this?" she couldn't help but ask.

Mutsuko answered with the air of an expert. "They're elevator maintenance manuals! I got one from every company that makes them.

Escalators, too!"

"Um, but why do you..."

"For survival! We of the survival club think it's important to be armed with the information to survive in any situation!"

"Survival? Survive what exactly?" Yuichi interrupted. Mutsuko ignored this and pressed on.

"Did you know the thing they do in movies where you get out through a hatch in the roof is impossible? See, you can't open them from the inside! I look up at the ceilings of elevators a lot, so I know! So you'd be stuck if someone attacks you, right?"

"Yeah, I remember... anytime you're in an elevator, you're craning your neck all around..."

"But elevators *do* have a compartment in the lower wall! Did you know that? They're there to carry coffins! So if it comes to it, you can hide in one of those!"

"Um... Aren't those usually locked?" Yuichi growled in frustration.

Aiko had never heard of such a thing. But if there were doors like that, they would have to be locked.

"So you pick the lock!"

"And... you said 'if it comes to it.' Just what are we hiding from, exactly?"

"...Zombies, I guess? Zombies are pretty dumb, so they probably couldn't find you there!"

Aiko's jaw slowly dropped as Mutsuko continued her never ending elevator rant. She could see what Yuichi had meant when he called her "an unfortunate case."

"Oh, and I hear the newest elevators have sideways escape hatches. They let you move to the next elevator over. Wouldn't that be a great adventure?!"

"Uh huh."

"And escalators, oh! They have maintenance shafts underneath! So if a ceiling collapses and you can't pass up top, you might be able to pass through underneath! This is really useful information!"

"You just read that in some manga!"

"Sakaki... what is your sister even..." Aiko trailed off, looking at Yuichi for help. She was completely lost.

"Ah... Um, my sister's the president of the survival club."

"Right."

"It's a club where they talk about stupid stuff."

"Wrong!" Mutsuko shouted. Her manner did a complete 180. "This knowledge is necessary to survive our modern age! Sudden earthquakes, biohazards, serial killings on isolated islands, alien attacks, being pulled into post-apocalyptic or fantasy worlds... there are all kinds of dangers out there! We simulate and discuss a variety of situations so we know how to protect ourselves! That's what the survival club is about!"

“Most of those don’t exist. There’s no such thing as aliens, and no one’s getting pulled into other worlds,” Yuichi said dismissively.

Aiko agreed with him in principle, but vampires did exist, and she’d seen undead creatures just yesterday. It was a little hard to just reject the rest out of hand.

“We do more than talk, too! This is today’s assignment! We’re gonna practice passing underneath escalators using these maintenance manuals!”

“I’m begging you... do not go around town messing with escalators based on stuff you read in manga...” Yuichi pleaded with her.

“Don’t worry! We’ve got help from the manufacturers! It’s a real field trip!”

“How do you get so much motivation?” he asked flatly.

“Hey... Just who is your sister, exactly?” Aiko whispered to Yuichi. It was hard to believe a normal high school student could get in touch with elevator manufacturers.

“Beats me. I don’t know anything about her personal connections, or where she gets her money...” he responded.

“We do running practice, too! Survival requires stamina! And we train up our grip strength and our arm strength, too, which is really useful if you end up dangling from a ledge! Speaking of which, I never asked your name! What is it?”

“...Aiko Noro...”

Aiko shrunk a bit before Mutsuko’s boundless enthusiasm.

“Oh, Noro, huh? What a cute name! Makes me think of norovirus!”

“...That might be... the rudest thing possible to say...” Yuichi moaned, hanging his head.

Aiko shared the sentiment. She had never been called a virus before.

“So, that means you’re joining the survival club too, right, Noro?”

“Huh?” The complete jump in logic caused Aiko’s jaw to drop. “Where did you get that idea?!”

“I’ll get your application ready! I let Yu handle them, so just fill it in and give it to him!”

With that, Mutsuko turned and left. Just when it felt like she would never stop talking, she was gone, just like that. Aiko’s head was still spinning from the whirlwind enthusiasm.

“Um...” she said.

“I guess now you see what I go through,” Yuichi muttered.

“Yeah...” Aiko stared at the door Mutsuko had gone through, and nodded.

*****

After his sister left, Yuichi decided to go home. If he didn’t have to go to her club, there was no reason to stay at school.

"I'm gonna go grab my bag. You moving out ahead of me?" he asked Aiko. She might have some business of her own, after all. He was a little worried, but they wouldn't necessarily be able to walk home together every day.

"No reason to go out of our way to walk home separately," she responded. The route home was more or less the same for both of them, but Aiko's house was roughly ten minutes away from Yuichi's.

Yuichi went down the stairs and headed for the classroom. Aiko was following a few seconds behind, her own bag in hand.

He opened the door.

Someone was there.

It was a boy, dressed in a school uniform and baseball cap. He was sitting at the back of the empty classroom at Yuichi's desk.

The moment Yuichi saw him, he slammed the door shut.

Yuichi ducked, did a backwards roll to the wall, and shouted "Noro, get down!"

Something whistled through the air, putting two holes through the wooden door before thunking into the wall behind him. Impaled deep in the concrete, they vibrated from impact.

Kunai: a long, slender shuriken, usually employed by ninjas. It was as if two had just sprouted out of the wall, right at the level where Yuichi's head had been a moment ago.

"Huh?" Aiko stared in shock.

"I told you to get down! ...Well, too late now, I guess. Let's get out of here!"

Yuichi stood, grabbed Aiko's hand, and started running.

"Wuh? Huh? What?" Aiko cried, letting herself be dragged along. She seemed too confused to do anything else.

"It's a serial killer!" he shouted.

"Huh? Takeuchi?"

"No! It's Serial Killer II!" Without stopping, Yuichi cast a glance behind him. The classroom door opened and the boy stepped out.

"Serial Killer II." That was the label over his head.

It was hard to tell from this distance, but judging from his height, he was probably about their age. His uniform was the high-collared type, though, so he must not have been from their school.

"Serial Killer II? That guy?"

"Yeah! That's what it says above his head!"

How can there be a two?! Yuichi thought frantically. *We haven't even figured out how to deal with* one *yet!*

The boy began striding leisurely in Yuichi and Aiko's direction.

Chapter 5: The Battle Against Serial Killer II

"Hey! Why are we running away?"

"Because he's chasing us, duh!"

"Why is he chasing us?"

"How should I know?!" Yuichi dragged Aiko by the hand until they reached the end of the corridor.

Luckily, Serial Killer II didn't seem to be in a hurry. They'd put a lot of distance between themselves and him.

Like all first-years, their classroom was on the fourth floor. The second-years had their rooms on the third floor, and the third-years on the second. The first floor contained the music room, art room, and staff office.

Classes for the day had been over for a while. At the very least, there was no sign of students here on the fourth floor. But there would still be students and teachers on the first floor involved in club activities.

Yuichi was torn. Should he call for help? Or should he try to face the serial killer himself?

"What should we do?" he asked Aiko, for lack of anyone else. But she seemed even less sure than he was.

"Oh! Um... First, what does he want? Is he after you?"

"I don't know. I don't know if he's attacking indiscriminately, or if he's after me in particular."

"If he's trespassing on school grounds, we'll have to tell a teacher, right?"

"Normally we would, yeah, but he's a killer. For now, we need to run. Going up would take us to the roof, so I guess we go down!"

Getting away from the school had to be their first priority. He'd just made up his mind about that and turned his gaze to the stairway, only to see the boy in the baseball cap standing right there.

"Hey. Are you Sakaki?" he asked casually. "I didn't expect my first volley to miss. I'd heard you were just an ordinary person."

During the time they'd lost sight of him, he must have gone down to the third floor to head them off. He must be quite fast.

"Sorry, Noro!" Yuichi swept Aiko up in his arms and ran as fast as his legs could carry him. Aiko seemed bewildered about being picked up so abruptly.

"Come on, let's have a little talk!" the boy called, running after them.

Not good! He's catching up to us! There was no way Yuichi could get

away while carrying Aiko.

Things flew past them from behind.

Huh?!

Kunai, most likely. He didn't stop to see. The boy had thrown a few dozen at them, trying to keep the pressure on.

There was nowhere to run. Yuichi kept up his pace, slamming into a classroom window at full speed.

"Eeek!" Aiko screamed, but Yuichi ignored it, knocking a desk over as he landed inside the classroom.

At almost the same moment, the door went flying, kicked in by the killer.

Yuichi fled for the outside-facing window.

I can't do this with my hands full! Yuichi shifted her from both arms to carrying her only in his left.

"Hey! Huh? What the—"

Yuichi planted his hand on the frame of the open window and leaped outside. He felt briefly like he was floating.

"Waaaagh!" Aiko screamed.

The next instant, his right hand found purchase on the bottom frame of the neighboring classroom window. He kept his grip up, flexing the arm and kicking off the wall to propel himself upwards again.

Grabbing the rail on the upper part of the frame with just his fingertips, he kicked through the glass and slid into the classroom next door with one smooth motion. Then he bounded for the exit, slamming through the door to run out into the hallway.

Okay! That bought us a little time!

Yuichi didn't stop for a moment. He kept running until he reached the end of the hallway. There was a stairway that could take them up to the roof, or down to the third floor.

Yuichi looked behind him. The killer boy hadn't shown himself. He might still be in the classroom.

What should I do? Yuichi thought.

Earlier, he'd considered going down to escape the school. But now he knew that wouldn't work. That boy was definitely a killer. He wouldn't hesitate to kill anyone he met. If Yuichi went downstairs now, it would only increase the casualties.

Still, if they went to the roof, they'd just end up cornered...

"Hey! Would you put me down already?" Aiko scowled up at him.

Yuichi set her down on the floor.

"What was that?" she cried. "I thought we were dead! My heart's still pounding!"

"What else could I do? If we'd just kept running straight down the hallway, he'd have thrown more shuriken at us." There was no time to waste in worrying right now. Yuichi steeled up his nerve. "I'm going to wait here and lure him up to the roof. You escape downstairs." Alone,

he could probably hold the boy off.

"No way!"

"Huh?" Yuichi couldn't believe it what he was hearing. If they split up, there was a better chance that at least Aiko could stay safe. He was the one the boy was after, after all.

"I said no way! I can't get away by myself! It's better if we stay together! B-Besides, what if I run downstairs, and he comes after me...?" Aiko clutched at Yuichi's uniform sleeve. She was shaking, terrified of the idea of being left all alone in a situation like this.

She had a point. Yuichi had assumed the killer was after him, but he couldn't be sure. Besides, if they split up and the boy took Aiko hostage, he would lose any hope of getting out of this.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to scare you. We'll get out of here together."

The words reassured Aiko, who smiled slightly. "So? What will we do on the roof?"

"I was thinking I could buy time on the roof, and you could call my sister and get her to come by."

"Huh? Why would we want your sister here?" Aiko stared at him in sheer bafflement.

Perhaps that was natural. But Yuichi's sister was always thinking through scenarios like, "What if terrorists attacked the school?" She might know what to do about a rampaging serial killer.

The boy came out of the classroom and started walking slowly towards the two of them.

"Anyway, let's get to the roof," Yuichi said. "I have an idea." He pulled Aiko by the hand up the stairs.

The door to the roof came quickly into sight, but something beside it drew Yuichi's attention. It was a stack of damaged desks. They must have been stored there for later disposal.

Yuichi tugged the desks out and hauled them to the top of the stairs.

"What are you doing?" Aiko asked.

"Just what it looks like. If he comes up after us, I'm gonna drop these on him!"

"Um, Sakaki, that's... bold..."

"After that... Noro, have you got money? Lend me— I mean, give me some!" Yuichi said.

"Is this really the time to be shaking me down?!"

"Yes! How much do you have?"

"Um, about 100,000?"

"What the hell? Why does a high school student have that much money on her?"

"None of your business! Why do you need money, anyway?"

"Any 500 yen coins?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Hand them over!"

Yuichi was aware that he wasn't making sense. But his sheer desperation may have gotten through to her, because she took out ten five hundred yen coins from the school bag she'd been clutching the whole time.

He heard footsteps coming up the stairs.

The moment he saw the hint of a shadow on the landing, Yuichi threw the desks. They tumbled down the steps with a loud clatter, seeming ready to hit their pursuer dead-on...

The boy threw his hand to the side. It was a casual gesture, like brushing away a fly, but the result was dramatic. The mountain of desks was batted aside, and they crashed into a wall. Yuichi's trap hadn't even slowed him down.

The boy's baseball cap fell off, revealing a head of short golden hair. But that wasn't what drew Yuichi's attention.

It was the horn.

There was a single blue, translucent horn growing out of his forehead, about the length of a fist. There was no way he could fit something like that under a baseball cap. Given its translucent appearance, maybe it was a hologram.

"Oh, jeez, he's stronger than I thought..." Yuichi muttered.

The boy slowly ascended the staircase. He didn't seem to be in a hurry at all.

He's... playing with us... Yuichi assumed he had come to kill them, but the boy seemed to be in no hurry at all. It was impossible to understand what he was thinking.

SERIAL KILLER II

“What are you doing?” Aiko asked.

“We can’t just keep running around mindlessly. We need to find the quickest route to my sister’s club room... ah!”

“What?!”

“...They might be out on their field trip...” His sister’s words came back to his mind.

Yuichi pulled Aiko out to the roof. There was a chain-link fence all around the edge. At first glance, there was nowhere left to run. Yuichi brought Aiko to about the center of the roof and spoke to her.

“Noro! Grab onto me from the front like a koala! I need both hands if we’re going to get out of here!”

“What the heck? I can’t do that!”

“It’s okay, you’re little!”

“Don’t call me little! And that’s not the issue!”

“Just do it!” Yuichi tugged Aiko toward him.

“Huh?! W-Wait a minute!”

“Just wrap your arms around my shoulders, and your legs around my waist!” The sharp edge to Yuichi’s voice must have surprised her, because she did just as he asked.

The sight of her clinging to the front of Yuichi’s torso would have looked ridiculous to any outside observer.

“It’s a little hard to move, but I think it’ll work,” he said.

“What the hell are you two doing?” The killer boy stood at the entrance to the roof, struck dumb by their current state.

“We’re getting ready to do something about you!”

“Oh, yeah?” The boy didn’t seem at all threatened. He must have been confident in his prey’s inability to escape.

Yuichi balled a hand into a fist. There were two 500 yen coins between each of his fingers: a total of eight.

“Take this!” From his slightly constrained posture, he held up his right arm, brought it back behind him as far as he could, then launched it forward. Snapping his wrist, he released the coins.

The weighty metal discs rained down on the boy.

The boy’s arrogance vanished in an instant, and he hastily crossed his arms to defend himself from the barrage.

Immediately after the throw, Yuichi turned around, ran to the fence, and climbed it, with Aiko still clinging to his front.

“Huh?” Aiko was confused, but just clung to him tighter.

Yuichi began running along the top of his fence at full speed.

“Hey! What are you doing?”

“Jumping. Hold on tight!”

“Huh?” They were on the roof of a four-story building. A fall from here would hurt them badly, if not kill them outright. Aiko’s hesitance was understandable, but Yuichi had a chance for success.

Feeling more kunai whiz past him, Yuichi picked up speed. It was the buildup to a long jump.

As he approached the edge of the fence, he steeled himself, planted his feet...

...and sprang off the roof.

The fall was brief. It took only a few seconds before they struck the ground.

“Huh? Huh? Huh?” Aiko was shouting in confusion.

Yuichi let his body go limp as he hit the ground, starting with the tips of his toes. He bent his knees and twisted to lessen the force of impact as he hit his back, rolled, and then sprang back to his feet.

“Uhhh?” A disoriented groan escaped Aiko’s lips.

Yuichi looked down to check on her. She looked dazed, but she wasn’t injured.

“I never thought I’d have the chance to use a five-point roll at school...” Yuichi breathed out the words, relieved and slightly awed.

The proper name for the technique was the Parachute Landing Fall. It was usually employed by paratroopers. Naturally, it was his big sister who had gleefully pushed him to learn it, having read about it in battle manga once.

Yuichi cast a glance back up at the roof. He had a feeling the serial killer was looking down and laughing at him.

*****

Aiko was so tense, she couldn’t convince herself to let go. Seeming to realize this, Yuichi set her gently on the ground.

She was still dizzy, and her footing was unsteady. She staggered, but before she could fall, Yuichi reached out to support her.

Her heart was beating like a kettledrum. She couldn’t catch her breath, and her throat was raw from anxiety.

“I-I-I-I-I-I...”

“You...?”

“I thought we were going to die! What the hell was that?!” Aiko was in no condition to be screaming right now, but she couldn’t stop herself.

“Yeah, it was a little reckless. I’m sorry.”

“A little?! You call that *a little*?!” One minute, he had been running along the top of the fence. The next, he was diving off of it. She still couldn’t believe it.

She started to feel lightheaded, and would have collapsed if Yuichi hadn’t continued to hold her up. Not only was she short of breath, she was starting to hyperventilate.

“Hey, calm down. Deep, slow breaths.” Yuichi said soothingly.

His words helped to calm her, but it was then that she realized how she had been clinging to him. Her face turned red, and her heart began

to race.

No one saw us, right? Aiko cast her eyes around fervently. She was so out of sorts, she wasn't even considering that being seen jumping off a roof would be much worse than being seen in the arms of a boy.

"Are you okay? I know you're probably frazzled, but we can't afford to just stand here," Yuichi said. He grabbed her hand and began running.

The old school building where the survival club met was still some distance away. He was right: There was no time to lose.

"Hey... we're still going... to see your sister, right?" Aiko asked between gasps for breath. "Though I doubt... she can do anything..."

"I don't know how, but she'll probably be able to help us with a situation like this!" The baselessness of his words was not filling Aiko with confidence.

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The boy was laughing. He looked down at the ground through the chain-link fence, and he laughed. What else could he do? It was absolutely absurd. It defied all imagination.

His initial volley had been dodged. He'd thrown his kunai, wordlessly, the instant the door opened. Yet Yuichi had dodged them. It was impossible. Yuichi should have been dead on the spot before he even knew what was happening.

Then, his wave of kunai had been dodged. Sidestepping the dozens of projectiles he had thrown in pursuit, Yuichi had broken the glass in a classroom window to jump in, and then, without losing momentum, he had flown out the outdoor window to the next classroom over.

But the real feat was the way he'd escaped. Climbing the fence, rushing along the top of the shaky rail at full speed — while dodging even more kunai — and then jumping off the roof...

"I mean, are you kidding me? Is he even human?" He never even considered that Yuichi would jump off the roof. Not only that, Yuichi had gotten up again, unharmed, and resumed running.

It was impossible. So what could he do but laugh?

Once his laughter died down, the boy remembered his priorities. Yuichi had gotten away while he was laughing. He couldn't just let him go.

He leaped over the fence in a single bound. There was a terrible noise as he hit the ground, landing on his side.

"Ow!"

He slowly picked himself up. It hurt a lot, but the damage was minor... within the realm of expectation.

But trying the jump for himself just confirmed to him how hard it was to control your posture in midair. Arranging a neat landing, feet

first, would be close to impossible. What kind of training must Yuichi have gone through to survive a fall from that height?

"I know what they're thinking. 'And so they escaped the killer successfully, and all lived happily ever after.' But then it wouldn't be much of a thriller, would it?" He began running in the direction the two had gone.

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On the way to their destination, Yuichi and Aiko ran behind the gym, so that even if the killer attacked them again, it would reduce collateral damage.

After passing the gym, the old school building was just a little further.

"If it's too hard to keep running, I can carry you, okay?" Yuichi said worriedly, upon noticing that Aiko was out of breath.

"I-I'm fine, so knock it off!" Aiko's face was flushed as she responded.

"Hey, do you know Takeuchi's cell number?" The question had suddenly occurred to him while they ran.

"What?" Aiko panted. "Yeah, we traded numbers. Why?"

"If he's called Serial Killer II, they could be connected. Which means maybe she could help us..."

Natsuki had said she wouldn't kill at school, which meant she was probably not responsible for this. That being the case, it was a matter of mutual interest: Natsuki wouldn't want killings to happen at school, and Yuichi didn't want to be killed.

Aiko pulled her cell phone out of her blazer pocket. Yuichi snatched it away and opened up her address book, getting ready to place the call.

"Wait! You're just gonna call her with my phone?"

"Huh? Oh, right... That would be a problem, huh?"

Natsuki had threatened to kill everyone if he told anyone. He couldn't let her know that Aiko knew. So instead, Yuichi called her with his own cell phone.

She answered immediately.

"This is Sakaki," he said. "What's going on here?"

"Sakaki? I don't recall trading numbers with you. And I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't play dumb with me," he shot back. "A serial killer's after me! Don't try to pretend you don't know something about it!"

"Where are you now, Sakaki?" she asked.

"The school."

"That idiot..." She clicked her tongue in annoyance.

"So you *do* have something to do with it!"

"Yeah. He wanted to use my hunting grounds, so I offered him a trade if he would finish off someone who knew my identity."

“Hey!”

“I thought it would be fine as long as I had an airtight alibi. I can’t believe he went after you at school.”

“What the hell kind of response is that? Call it off already!”

“Hmm. But I can’t. He’s kind of the never-gives-up-on-his-prey, follows-you-to-the-ends-of-the-earth type.”

“Oh, come on!” That was about all the argument he could manage, though. Nothing more effective was coming to him.

“I’m heading over now. I can’t have murders happening at my school. Don’t die, okay? Just keep running.” Then she hung up.

“Takeuchi says she’s coming... but I think she might be against us, too...”

“Wh-What do we do?!”

“Well, I’m sure my sister can handle it... at least, I hope she can...” Yuichi tried to hide his anxiety.

They had been running the entire time he was on the phone. Now they arrived at the entrance to the old school building.

They dashed up the first staircase they saw inside, heading for the survival club’s meeting room. It was at the end of the hall on the second floor.

Yuichi bolted towards it with all his might. Just as he reached the door, it opened.

Mutsuko stepped out, looking a little surprised at the sight of Yuichi. “Yu? What’s wrong? I said you didn’t have to come today. You really wanna climb under an escalator, huh?”

“No!” he shouted.

Locking the door to the club room behind her, she must have been the last one out. Perhaps the others had already gone off on their field trip.

“What about you, Noro? You really wanna go survival training with us, huh? I’ll get you a submission form...” Mutsuko began searching through her bag.

“We don’t have time for that! There’s a serial killer after me!”

“Huh?!” Mutsuko’s face lit up with delight. “No way! That’s awesome!”

“Sure, that’s the word I’d use for it...”

“Hmm, but having the killer appear after school isn’t the coolest. He ought to show up in the middle of class, like the Shorty Alien, or Shimada covered in acid!”

“That would be a disaster! A traumatized-for-life level disaster!”

“So, what’s the big deal? Just take him out already,” Mutsuko said flippantly.

“Just take him out?! I don’t think he’s even human! There’s no way I can beat him!”

“Hold it! Did you just say he’s not human?!” Mutsuko grabbed

Yuichi's shoulders and shook him.

"Don't get excited! He's got horns, and he slapped aside a pile of desks with one hand. That's way past human level!"

"Horns... how many?"

"Just one."

"Oh, you'll be fine!"

"How?!"

"Just one horn means he's probably weak!"

He couldn't imagine what she was basing that on. A chill was starting to spread throughout his body.

"What should I do?" he shouted.

"I guess you just have to beat him," she said.

It was exactly what he had feared. He was going to be forced to fight.

"See? We found your sister, but it hasn't changed anything!" Aiko said fiercely. But behind her recrimination, her expression was nervous.

"Don't rub it in... I was just thinking that myself..."

"Hey! Is that the serial killer?" Mutsuko pointed to the far end of the hallway, where a boy stood, blond, wearing a high-collared uniform.

They were cornered. Yuichi looked around in panic.

The stairwell nearest them was closed off due to deterioration. It would be dangerous to use it.

The boy strode toward them as leisurely as ever. He was smiling, as if he was looking forward to whatever Yuichi might show him next.

"Hmm, I've gotta say..." Mutsuko peered at the serial killer boy, her gaze unusually focused. "There's something off-kilter about the way he walks. I don't think he knows his center of gravity. Typical all-brawn, no-brains type. And he's taken damage on his right side. I don't think he's aware of it, but the way he's compensating suggests damage to the internal organs. In other words, a good sucker punch could probably do a lot of damage. Why did you think you couldn't beat him, again?"

"Are you kidding me?!"

"Yu, you've gotta start sizing these guys up on your own."

"I didn't have time! He ambushed me!" he shouted.

But she was right. Now that he was calming down, he could more or less take the killer's measure. If without his sister's level of precision...

"Right. Okay! Yu, it's time to pop your cherry!" she exclaimed.

"M-My cherry?" he stammered.

The abrupt, inappropriate reference caused Aiko's face to turn scarlet.

"I don't want to kill people!" he added.

"Don't worry, he's not people! Just a handy prop for you to pop your cherry," Mutsuko asserted, repeating the embarrassing metaphor. It must refer to the act of killing someone, a term soldiers used to refer to their first kill. Of course, Mutsuko's knowledge of it came from manga.

“Oh, forget it! What matters is, I can beat him, right? So you take care of the rest!”

“Got it! If you end up as a twitching heap on the ground, I’ll carry you home on my shoulder!”

“Not over the shoulder, please. That would be a little too pathetic.” Yuichi turned to the serial killer and began walking. The killer noticed he was coming, but didn’t alter his pace.

They were right on the verge of melee range when they both stopped.

“What? I was looking forward to seeing how you’d get away this time. Thought maybe you’d take another dive through a window.”

“Sorry to disappoint you, but I’m through with running away. It’s time to stop you.”

Unable to decide what to do against the killer, Yuichi had just been fleeing. After all, this wasn’t just some high school brawl. To fight a serial killer, you had to be prepared for certain things. There was no way to win if you held back. It was kill or be killed.

He hadn’t been able to commit to that before, but now, his big sister had said he could beat him.

That meant that he could. She also said she’d handle the aftermath, so whatever happened, they’d get out all right.

Yuichi made up his mind.

“*Furukami,*” he whispered.

He kicked off with his left foot, straining the muscles in that leg past their limits. His left leg was now useless.

He bounded off the wall to the killer’s right, flying higher into the air, then instantly reoriented himself across the short distance to face the killer and bring down his heel.

To the killer, Yuichi would seem to vanish, before reappearing as a heel screaming down on him from midair.

The killer barely had time to react. He just managed to dodge the left heel coming down at him. But he couldn’t dodge the right heel that followed just after. It cracked him on the top of his head, and that was that.

Yuichi landed, pressed further into the killer’s personal space, and struck him hard in the back with his fist. A low cracking sound echoed through the hallway.

In an instant, the fight was over.

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“Gwuh?” Aiko yelped.

Yuichi had stopped, and the next thing she knew, the killer was on the ground. She had no idea what had just happened.

“That’s furukami! It’s a technique you see a lot in old martial arts! It

lets you temporarily exceed human limitations! Dopamine secretion, pain perception inhibiting, limiter release, et cetera et cetera. Yu pushed the muscles of his left leg past their limits, propelling him faster than his opponent's eye could perceive. Then he used a double axe kick! If the left one had hit, it would just cause him pain, so he used that as a decoy for the real axe, the right leg!"

"A-Ah." Aiko wasn't following a word of it. But Mutsuko didn't seem to notice, and she just kept chattering on.

"The next part is even simpler. He concentrated all the power in his body into his fist, then released it! It's similar to, though not quite like, the Chinese martial art concept of fa jin! I had Yu practice it until he could one-inch punch through the futons while they were out drying on the line! Oh, how he used to cry! So cute!"

"U-Um... Just what have you been doing to Sakaki?"

"Training him! A man should be strong!" Mutsuko beamed with pride.

Aiko felt very sorry for Yuichi.

Chapter 6: When You Borrow Money, You've Got to Return It

If the human body came with natural limiters, that meant there were things it wasn't meant to do. So what would happen if you broke through those limits?

The answer was what Yuichi's body was now experiencing.

He was curled up in a corner of the hallway, his face screwed up in pain. His shredded muscles were swollen from their self-healing process. Put simply, his body was screaming in agony. His left leg was especially bad. He wouldn't be walking for a while.

"It's hard to train the top of the head! It's a weak point! See, Yu said the guy was superhuman, so I knew he couldn't beat him in a fair fight. That's why you've gotta strike 'em where they're vulnerable! He'd probably won at that point, but you've always gotta hit them again just to be sure. Thus, a good blow to the kidney! I thought his oni muscles might be strong enough to keep it from going through, but I guess it wasn't an issue!"

She seemed to have just assumed that the horned attacker was an oni.

"Um... Mutsuko? Is Sakaki okay?" Aiko ventured.

Mutsuko had just been chattering on, paying little heed to her brother's condition, so Aiko had gone to check on him.

"He's fine! He's tough! Yeah, he's as tough as the mother and daughter from *Shatun: Higuma no Mori*!" she declared.

"I don't even know what that means!"

"Oh? Well, how about this: He's tough enough to take a hit from a 750cc Nanahan and say 'Don't worry, I'm good!'"

"Um... By Nanahan, you mean the motorcycle? Has he been hit by a motorcycle before?"

"Yeah! And he was still kicking afterwards. Furukami takes a toll, but he's fine! Last time, he just needed a full day's rest to recover!"

Aiko looked like she wasn't sure whether to be worried or relieved.

Yuichi had used the furukami knowing it would take him a day to recover. He probably wouldn't have been able to keep the fight going for long, yet he'd known that if anything happened, his sister would take over. That was why he'd gone forward.

Aiko walked up to Yuichi, whose face was contorted in pain. "Hey, Sakaki," she said.

"Hmm?"

“Have you been hiding the fact that you’re really strong?”

“Um...” Yuichi unconsciously averted his eyes.

“If you could beat him, did we even have to do all that running around?”

“Well...” Yuichi fumbled. He was sure his expression reflected dire embarrassment.

“Allow me to explain!” Mutsuko interrupted, popping up beside her. “‘Oh, it’s so hard! I’m so strong, yet I must hide my true power to avoid the spotlight! I cannot reveal it for something so trivial!’ That’s the little performance he likes to keep up.”

“No! That’s not how it is!” Yuichi screamed so hard he nearly spat blood, and pleaded with his eyes for Aiko to believe him.

“...Sorry... I think I just misunderstood something about you, Sakaki. It’s okay. I believe you...” Aiko patted Yuichi’s head gently.

“What did you misunderstand?”

“The way you sprung that secret on me and stuff? I thought you were a real jerk.”

“Oh, that... Um, sorry...” His apology was genuine. Even though he’d wanted her help, there would probably have been a better way to ask for it.

“Welp, too bad that your secret’s out now,” Mutsuko continued, oblivious to the quiet moment they were sharing. “Bye-bye to your peaceful school life, huh? All those surreptitious glances... hey!” she fumed, as she finally seemed to notice. “Don’t leave me and go off into your own little world! It’s lonely out here!” She clearly didn’t like being ignored.

“Anyway, it’s not like I was hiding it,” Yuichi muttered. “It’s just, people who bring up how they can kick anyone’s ass for no reason are idiots. And I just started high school this year, you know? It wasn’t really the time to start bragging about my fighting skills. And... maybe if I’d studied proper karate or judo or something, I wouldn’t mind coming out with it. But... look, I practice a weird fighting style my sister made up based on stuff she read in manga! I can’t show that to people, it’s humiliating!”

“Oh, Yu! So easily embarrassed, even in high school!” Mutsuko gave him a playful clap on the back.

“It’s *because* I’m in high school that it’s embarrassing!”

“Um... I won’t tell anyone if it would embarrass you. But can we figure out what do we do with that oni person?” Aiko asked, cutting into the sibling argument.

Yuichi focused back on their fallen enemy. He could wake up at any time, so dealing with him had to be their first priority.

“Good question,” Mutsuko said. “We can’t just leave him here, but I’ve got my escalator workshop to get to...”

Yuichi’s eyes widened in surprise. “Huh? You’re still going to that?

Doesn't this seem a little more important?" He couldn't believe she was putting some stupid workshop over this.

"How can you say that, Yu?" Mutsuko asked. "It's important to keep your promises. The adult world runs on trust."

"Ugh... *Now* you're playing the common sense card?"

Mutsuko squatted next to the fallen boy and prodded him here and there, as if investigating something. "I see. He definitely looks like a foreigner. See? His eyes are blue." Mutsuko pulled up one of his eyelids.

The features of the boy's face were deeply set, his hair blond, and his eyes blue. Viewed up close, he was clearly not Japanese.

"You said he had a horn when you first saw him, right? But I don't see it now... Maybe it only appears when he's using his powers? ...I get it. So there's some truth to the Foreign Oni theory. You know this one? It says the oni from the Momotaro legend were actually foreigners. There's a theory that tengu are foreigners, too. What if they're all just foreigners, you know? I guess some people must think kappa and stuff are foreigners, too..."

"Enough with the trivia! What are we doing?" Yuichi urged her. He looked afraid that if he let her go on, she'd never stop.

"For now, we should get him tied up. Yu... no, you probably can't handle it yet. Noro, then. Could you take that end?" Mutsuko lifted one of the boy's arms, and directed Aiko to take the other. She seemed to want to drag him somewhere.

Aiko did as she was told, taking the boy's hand and working with Mutsuko to pull him to the club room door. "Will just locking him up in a room be enough? He'll probably wake up soon," she said.

"Don't you worry. I've got ways of dealing with oni!" As she spoke, Mutsuko unlocked the door.

The two worked together to drag him inside.

Yuichi managed to pick himself up, curious about what they were doing. He had recovered a little bit. Running was still beyond him, but he could manage a slow walk.

It seemed she had finished her anti-oni preparations in the time it took him to get there. The boy had been set on his side on the floor, wrapped again and again with shimenawa, a ceremonial Shinto rope. Some kind of dried fish and leaves were stuck into and on the rope. A peach had been shoved into his mouth — probably fake, since it was holding its shape — likely to act as a gag.

There was a paper talisman stuck to his forehead painted with symbols Yuichi couldn't understand. That was all strange by itself, but there was more. All around the boy, there were more strange items: measuring cups full of soybeans, swords made of wood, and swords made from coins linked together with thread...

The sheer nonsense of it was making him dizzy.

Mutsuko caught sight of him. "Oh, you can walk already? Huh... I

bet that means we can extend the furukami's activation time... Hey, can you make it home yourself? If so, I'll just go straight to my club activities."

"I can make it home myself. So, what is all that stuff?"

"Oni countermeasures! Sardines and holly leaves and soybeans for Setsubun! And just to be safe, I added in some Chinese-style measures. Swords made from plum wood and coin swords!"

"I won't even ask where you got those. Do they work?" Just like her room at home, the club room was piled high with inscrutable items. He wouldn't be surprised by anything he might find.

"You bet! When it comes to yokai and ghosts and urban legends, pretty much all the common knowledge stuff works. I mean, if there were no easy way to stop them, they'd overrun us in no time! In other words, they've gotta have tons of weaknesses. Take vampires, for example. They're vulnerable to the sun, garlic, crosses... can't cross running water, can't be seen in mirrors... That's how they get weeded out!"

Aiko's jaw dropped.

Yuichi's face turned a shade paler. There was a vampire with very few weaknesses right in front of her. It cast extreme doubts upon Mutsuko's logic.

"Listen... just hypothetically, what if there was a vampire or something that didn't have those weaknesses?" I asked.

"Good question. I guess it's possible! But no worries. If they don't have weaknesses, they'd be pretty weak themselves, and thus, no threat to us!"

"What kind of logic is that?"

"Well, you don't have to worry about oni, at least. Come on, they're famous! Why would we still do the Setsubun Festival here in Japan if this stuff didn't work?"

Mutsuko left the room, beaming with confidence. Yuichi and Aiko followed.

Yuichi cast a worried glance with Aiko. Her confusion was written all over her face. It must have all seemed incomprehensible to her.

Yuichi put a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"Don't worry, Noro. I don't get it, either," he reassured her.

Mutsuko hummed to herself, clearly confident in her countermeasures as she locked up the room.

"Hey, it's one thing to leave him here, but what if someone comes? The night teacher has a key, right? Won't it be bad if they find him?"

"Smart thinking, Yu! I hadn't even considered that! But don't worry! I just had a great idea!"

Mutsuko went back into the room and returned with some printer paper, a felt-tipped pen, and a bit of tape.

"I'll just put up a sign!" she exclaimed. Mutsuko sat down on the

floor and started scratching words on the paper.

Yuichi peeked over her shoulder, curious about what she was writing. In elegant handwriting, it read:

Now serving: chilled ramen!

"That's the opposite of what we want! Anyone would want to open the door to find out what was going on inside!"

"It was a mistake! That's just where my mind goes when I think about writing signs..." Mutsuko crumpled up the paper and tried again. Her handwriting was once again unnecessarily elegant. This time, it was probably what she meant to write.

It said: *Bug bomb in progress!*

"I feel a little bad to be treating him like a cockroach..." Aiko said guiltily. "Is it even okay to leave him locked in there until tomorrow? Won't he get hungry or something?'

"He should be fine if it's just for a day," Yuichi said. Aiko was letting Yuichi lean on her shoulder as they walked towards the school's front gate.

The sun was setting on the tree-lined path. Mutsuko had run off already, worried about being late.

At this time of day, the only people left at school would be busy with club activities. Everyone else was gone.

"Are you okay, Sakaki?" Aiko asked.

"I think a day's rest should do it," he answered. "I feel better enough already that I'll probably be more or less mobile by tomorrow."

"I hope so... Hey, can I get my money back?"

"Huh?"

"I gave you those 500 yen coins, remember? Give them back."

"I told you to give them to me!"

"...You really think it works that way? You think you can just get 500 yen and not have to pay it back?"

"Right, but I threw those coins and don't know where they went."

"I know. I'm not talking about the ones you threw. I consider those a necessary sacrifice. But you only threw eight, right? There should be two left."

"...I can't believe you noticed that. Look, I wasn't trying to rip you off or anything! I just forgot."

Aiko narrowed her eyes at Yuichi skeptically. "Well, don't worry about it now. You can pay me back later."

"...For someone with all that money, you're pretty stingy..."

"Hey, do you have any other surprising skills I should know about?" Aiko looked at Yuichi expectantly. He couldn't hide his discomfort about the question.

"Eh... Well... I do have a few. As far as stuff like this goes, I guess I can throw wooden chopsticks."

“You mean the kind you get at convenience stores? What good does throwing them do?”

“I can pierce a tatami mat.”

“...Just what have you been fighting, Sakaki?” Aiko stared at him in disbelief.

“I haven’t been fighting anything! If I’d spent my whole life fighting monsters, I wouldn’t be afraid of a serial killer!”

“Oh, good point. So what was that jump you did?”

“It’s called a five-point landing. Parachutists use it to break their falls.”

“Oh, say... Did you use that when you saved me, too? You were on the roof, right?”

“I slid down the wall that time.”

“Huh?”

“It’s a lot safer.”

Aiko let the conversation trail off, sinking deep into thought about something.

“What’s wrong?” Yuichi asked.

“Um... I was thinking I should thank you, but... none of this would have happened if you hadn’t gotten me mixed up in it in the first place... so I guess I won’t.”

“Good point. I just seem to make trouble for you... well, I guess we’re both making trouble for each other. There’s the thing with your brother, too. Though I still don’t know what to do about that.”

“...Hey. Did you get a little less formal with me at some point?” Aiko asked.

“Huh? Did I?” Yuichi looked taken aback. He only just seemed to realize it. A wall had come down sometime when they were being chased by Serial Killer II. “If you don’t like it, I can stop.”

“...It’s okay,” Aiko said. She didn’t mind. “Speaking of which, you didn’t answer before, but why did you run when you could have just beaten him?”

“Look... if you saw a monster, would your first thought be about how to beat it? You’d run, wouldn’t you?” Yuichi sighed. People weren’t barbarians. When attacked, no modern-day person’s first thought would be about how to strike back. It was always safest to run away if you could.

“True enough, but... what made you decide to fight, then?”

“My sister told me I could win. She might be a little weird, but she’s got perfect judgment about that kind of thing. If she’d told me to run, I would have kept running with the two of you.”

“Hmm... So you trust her, huh?”

“Hey! Don’t treat it like some kind of heartwarming story!”

“You don’t think it is? You seem to get along better than me and my brother, at least.”

"...Well, I guess it's not bad. But isn't it weird to have a close relationship with your big sister even after you're in high school?"

"Is it? Well, I guess I wouldn't want to be that close to my brother right now, myself..."

Their slow walk eventually brought them in sight of the school gate.

Just before they reached it, Yuichi stopped abruptly. Aiko cast him a questioning glance.

"I completely forgot... Noro, play dumb."

"Huh?" she asked.

Yuichi's voice was hushed, his eyes locked on the gate. What was he looking at?

The grounds were lined with hedges a bit taller than eye level. Yuichi couldn't see what was past the gate, but he could sense a presence there.

He started walking forward again, cautiously.

The first thing he saw were the words "Serial Killer."

Natsuki Takeuchi stepped into view from the other side of the gate. "Good day, Sakaki, Noro. Hmm? Or is it good evening?" she said.

She was still in her school blazer. She must not have gone home at all. She must have just hung around outside.

"Nice act," Yuichi muttered.

Natsuki looked at him in confusion. "Excuse me?"

He suddenly realized that her feigned small talk was due to Aiko's presence beside him. If Natsuki thought Aiko was uninvolved, it was in his best interest to play along.

"Never mind. What are you doing here at this hour, Takeuchi? Forget something?"

"More or less," she responded. "You two have been very close lately. Are you dating?"

"Umm... er..." Aiko stammered, her face red.

If Yuichi didn't stop her, she'd reveal everything. "Not exactly," he broke in. "I twisted my ankle, and Noro happened to find me. She's been helping me out."

Yuichi moved away from Aiko and leaned against the gate.

"Noro. Thanks for getting me this far. I'll be fine now, so you go on ahead."

"Um, but..."

"I can make it if I walk slowly enough. I couldn't ask you to walk me all the way home," he said casually.

Get going! Yuichi thought as he stared at Aiko.

"Okay," she said at last. "Well... see you later. Take care on the way home, okay?"

With that, Aiko went on her way. Yuichi and Natsuki were left alone together.

It was Natsuki who broke the silence first.

"I didn't think I'd find you alive." She seemed surprised. Almost impressed.

"You sure took your time, didn't you?" Yuichi shot back, quietly testing his body's mobility.

Aside from his left leg, he could probably move if he forced it... but if Natsuki's skills were equal to or greater than Serial Killer II's, he wouldn't stand a chance.

"You don't know where I was, yet you claim I was taking my time?" Natsuki asked pointedly. "...Well, you're not wrong. To be honest, I figured you were done for, so I didn't bother hurrying. I spent a little time searching around the school, but there was no sign of police being called, or any kind of trouble, so I came to see what was going on. What happened?"

Yuichi searched through his pocket. He still had two of the 500 yen coins he'd borrowed. They wouldn't make great weapons.

"I took your advice and just kept running. That was how I ended up twisting my ankle. Then at some point, he disappeared."

"Huh? That seems unlikely... but I guess I'll believe you."

"Huh?" It had been a pathetic excuse, so the fact that she believed it caused Yuichi's facade to slip for a second.

"That's the only way you could have survived," Natsuki shrugged. "He's the capricious type, anyway, so I wouldn't be surprised if he did get bored."

Her words had a certain logic to them. It was probably hard enough to believe that Yuichi had survived an attack, much less fought back and beaten the attacker. He decided to stick with that story.

"Tell him not to come after me again, then," Yuichi said. "You don't have any reason to go out of your way to kill me, right?"

"I guess not," Natsuki said. "I thought things would be easier for me with you out of the way, but it seems like asking him for help just made things worse. I'll tell him to knock it off, though I don't know if he'll listen to me. So I'll give you a warning. Watch your step on the way home. The hunt may still be on. If you let your guard down, I can't promise you won't end up with a knife in your back." With that, Natsuki left.

After confirming that Natsuki was gone, Yuichi slid to the ground, his back still against the gate.

He let his breath out and relaxed, slowly.

I'll rest for a few minutes, then head home...

But before he could finish that thought, someone approached him with a desperate cry.

"Sakaki!" Yuichi lifted his face again. Aiko was standing in front of him, her face pale.

"It's out!" she exclaimed.

“Huh?” Yuichi asked. Aiko was clearly flustered, but he didn’t understand why.

“I was waiting around the corner, and Takeuchi came up to me!” she cried.

“I told you to go right home…” Yuichi sighed.

“W-Well, Takeuchi commutes by train, so I thought she’d go the other way, heading toward the station…”

“So, what’s out, exactly?” he asked, returning to the original question.

“She took me by surprise and said, ‘Don’t give out my telephone number to people,’ so I said, ‘I’m sorry’…”

Yuichi covered his face in his hands. He didn’t know for sure that their secret was out, but it did indicate a connection between him and Aiko. Then again, the fact that Takeuchi had even tried to bait her that way indicated that she suspected it. Even if Aiko hadn’t said anything, it may have been a matter of time before she realized Yuichi and Aiko were colluding.

“…Well, I guess the secret’s out… So, did she just let you go?”

“She walked off, at least…” Aiko said.

Yuichi tried to think about how best to put Natsuki off the trail. “For now, let’s go home and sleep,” he said at last. He was exhausted, and his body hurt. Thinking was beyond him right now.

“Huh? What the heck?”

“We’ll figure it out tomorrow!” Yuichi declared, with as much confidence as he could muster.

And then he walked home, leaning on Aiko’s shoulder the whole way.

Chapter 7: Welcome to the Survival Club!

“Hey, Sakaki! Did you hear? There’s a delinquent at the school!”

“Huh?” The day after the mess with the killer, Yuichi came to school, only to be immediately accosted by Shota.

The label above his head now read “Ball Washer.”

“Jeez, right to the bottom!” Yuichi reflexively commented.

“Huh?” Shota suddenly seemed at a loss for words.

“Ah, sorry. I guess that sounded pretty random. Just felt like saying it,” Yuichi apologized. Maybe Shota had been an ace striker in middle school, but it seemed he would have had to start again from square one now that he was in high school.

“So, who’s the delinquent?” he asked, trying to swerve the subject away from his bizarre outburst. Knowing Shota, he would be easily distracted... and indeed, he was.

“He broke a window and took out a door! Look! There are holes in our door, too! Man, I didn’t think people still did stuff like that, but I guess the proof’s right there.”

Yuichi stiffened. He had completely forgotten about all the things he’d broken while he was trying to escape. He looked at the door to the classroom. There were two holes in it.

“Oh, yeah, right. It’s like whats-his-face Ozaki, the singer. Talk about retro, y’know?” Yuichi knew his response lacked conviction. He was the one actually behind it, after all.

“I hear there were shuriken stuck in the wall, too.”

“Y-Yeah. A ninja delinquent. That’s a new one, huh?” Yuichi was kicking himself for forgetting to clean afterwards. Then again, even if he’d remembered to hide the kunai, there was no way he could have repaired the glass and the door. There was nothing to do, then, but to pray that no one fingered him as the culprit.

“By the way, what’s up with your bag? I saw it on your desk and figured you’d gotten here before me.”

“Huh? Oh, yeah, I forgot to take it home yesterday.” As usual, Shota bought the excuse, and didn’t press him any further on the issue.

“It’s just hard to believe someone at this school would do something like that...” Shota looked around the classroom. There was no one around them, at least, whose appearance screamed “delinquent.”

“Sometimes the most ordinary-looking people can be holding a lot of stress inside. Maybe it’s the person you’d least suspect,” Yuichi hedged,

but it didn't reduce the guilt he felt inside.

His anxiety about leaving the killer boy unattended continued to grow throughout the day. After class, he and Aiko immediately went to visit the survival club classroom.

"I couldn't think straight all day yesterday, I was so freaked out. What about you, Sakaki?"

"Huh? I went right to sleep after I got home. Then I woke up, had dinner, and got sleepy again. Next thing I knew, it was morning."

"You didn't think about anything? Like what we're going to do next?" Aiko asked, dumbstruck.

He had to admit it made him sound like a scatterbrain, but he'd just been so sleepy, he hadn't been able to help himself. Besides, he was feeling a lot better after a good night's sleep. Almost all the aftereffects of the furukami had passed.

"...For now, all we can do is talk to her." Yuichi ran his hand through his hair.

He had been steeling himself up all day for a talk with Natsuki Takeuchi. He couldn't deny he'd been a bit relieved when it had turned out she hadn't come that day. The only immediate question remaining, then, was what to do with the killer they'd left in the club room.

They walked to the old school building, a creaky wooden structure that was currently home mostly to culture clubs and storage rooms. Parts of it were warded off due to deterioration. It had been scheduled for demolition, but budget issues had caused that to be delayed.

Yuichi climbed with Aiko to the second floor and headed for the room furthest down the hall. He immediately noticed something amiss.

There was a female student standing in front of the door. She was fidgeting. Her hair was wavy and dyed chestnut, and she seemed like the soft-spoken type.

The label above her head read "Isekai Fanatic."

She was looking all around in agitation, and made eye contact with Yuichi and Aiko as they approached.

"Oh! Sakaki's little brother!"

"Um... Orihara, right?"

Kanako Orihara was Mutsuko's friend. He had met her when she had visited their house before, but didn't know much about what sort of person she was.

"Look, it says they're bug bombing! What will we do? I kept telling Sakaki that leaving all those things lying around would lead to unsanitary conditions..."

"Um, actually..." Yuichi looked at the door.

Bug bomb in progress!

The paper was still up.

He tried the knob. It was locked, which meant Mutsuko hadn't been

here yet.

"Stop it! They'll get out! You know, the... the black things!"

"Um, you mean cockro—"

"Don't say it!" She fixed Yuichi with a glare that shut him right up.

"Sakaki... Who is this?" Aiko leaned over and questioned him.

"She's my sister's friend, a member of the survival club. Orihara... I think."

"Is it okay if she sees the guy inside there?"

"...Probably, since she's a member of the club, but..." He cast a dubious glance at Kanako. If the thought of seeing a cockroach freaked her out that badly, what would she do if she saw a boy tied up in shrine ropes?

"Um, Orihara, do you have the key to the room?"

"We are not going in there!" she snapped back.

"Look, I think my sister just put the sign up as a joke. There's no bug bomb. Nothing's going to come out."

"You mean it?"

"Yeah."

Kanako laid a hand to her chest in relief. She must have truly been afraid. "But I really don't have a key. I left it at home."

"I see. Who all has keys?"

"Just the president and the vice president. That's Sakaki and me."

"Then we're stuck until Mutsuko shows up, huh? But we look like fools just standing around here..." Yuichi pulled a toolbox out of his bag.

He opened it, revealing a row of metal objects that resembled screwdrivers with sharply tapered tips.

"Sakaki... What is that?" Aiko asked, bewildered.

It was only natural that she wouldn't know, so Yuichi answered. "Lockpicks, for unlocking doors. A cylinder lock like this is easy enough to open, so..."

"You thief!" Aiko reproached.

"I am not!"

"B-But look at yourself..." Aiko wrinkled her nose at the lockpicks.

"It's not like I'm breaking in or anything. We'd be going in anyway, so it's just a question of sooner or later, right?"

"Or we could just wait until your sister shows up..."

"Fine." Though rankled by the criticism, he closed the toolbox obligingly.

"You blame a lot on your sister, Sakaki, but you're pretty weird just by yourself. Don't you even realize that?"

"What was that?"

"Nothing," Aiko responded, innocently.

They didn't have to wait long for Mutsuko to show up.

"Sis, you're late. What were you off doing?"

"Yes, Sakaki, what were you doing?"

Now that she mentioned it, Yuichi realized, Mutsuko and Kanako were both in Class 2-A. Why hadn't they just come together?

"Oh, see, I heard there was a delinquent at the school! He broke some glass in a first-year classroom! I was all, 'Whoa, in a nice quiet school like this?' so I went to check it out! Wonder who did it! Maybe he's one of those 'had a dance with hard luck' types!"

"U-Um, uh, about that..." Yuichi stammered. He realized he hadn't actually told her about that.

"Oh, and I was thinking about the bug bomb thing! I decided it wasn't gonna work after all, so I prepared a new sign!"

"Forget about the signs! We don't need another one!"

"I thought someone might get the wrong idea."

"...Yeah, we've seen plenty of someone here getting the wrong idea, haven't we?"

"Also, it felt kind of like lying. So I wrote this!" With that, Mutsuko tore off the bug bomb sign and stuck up a new one.

Demon Castle Goddamn.

"That makes no sense! This is the survival club, right? So that's a lie, too!"

"Really? I think anyone would be hesitant to come in if they thought Lord Greed might be hanging around. And I refer to this room as Demon Castle Goddamn, so it's not a lie!"

"How many people will even get the reference?!"

"...Good point. How about this for a compromise, then?" Mutsuko took out her felt-tipped pen and wrote directly on the sign to fix it. It now read: *Demon Castle Goddaclub.*

"What kind of club is that supposed to be?!"

Mutsuko unlocked the door and opened it.

The first thing Yuichi noticed was the smell. The boy was still tied up, and didn't seem to have moved since yesterday. The fake peach stuck in his mouth was slick with drool.

He seemed to have regained consciousness, but his eyes were glazed over, and he lay there motionlessly. A puddle on the floor around his lower half seemed to be the source of the stench.

"I know he's the one who attacked me, but I still feel kind of sorry for him."

"Ah-ha! I failed to account for this possibility! Noro, fetch a bucket and a rag, would you? Yu, give him a change of clothes if you have one!"

"I have the uniform I wore for gym... it's pretty sweaty, but better than what he's got on right now."

Aiko obediently went to fetch a bucket and rag while Mutsuko untied the boy. Yuichi watched nervously. He was afraid he might just be playing possum, but even after being freed, the killer boy showed no

signs of being ready for a fight.

Yuichi checked his condition, then took off his dirty clothes and dressed him in the short-sleeved uniform shirt and shorts he pulled out of his bag.

He waffled for a minute over what to do with the boy's old uniform, but eventually decided to just stuff it into a trash bag. As he did, he searched it, retrieving some kunai, several makibishi, and a cell phone, all of which he placed on the desk.

What is this guy, a ninja?

Kanako walked unsteadily into the room, passed them by wordlessly, then opened the window to stare up at the sky. She seemed to be retreating from reality.

Yuichi sat the boy, now dressed in fresh clothes, in a chair, and wrapped the ropes around him again.

They then washed up with the rag Aiko brought, and after a few minutes of ventilation, the smell had vanished.

"Okay, let's make it official. Noro, Yu! Welcome to the survival club!"

Yuichi and Aiko looked around the room again. It had once been a classroom, so it was quite large, but the clutter made it seem much smaller. The most notable items were the bookshelves, lined up like you'd see in a library, which took up most of the room.

Taking up the next most amount of space were the cardboard boxes — stacks and stacks of them. Yuichi couldn't even begin to guess what might be inside. They were interspersed with piles of masks, jars, dolls, and other random junk.

There was nothing on the walls except for a large number of colorful rocks that jutted out of them, spaced out more or less regularly, from floor to ceiling. They were even in the ceiling itself.

"Hey... What are those?" Aiko pointed to the rocks on the wall.

"Hmm? Oh, those are bouldering holds. We use them for climbing practice."

Bouldering was a type of rock-climbing, done without the aid of tools. To practice, you could stick stones in the walls and use them as handholds.

"Why do you have that?"

"Well, climbing is a very important skill for survival! You see..."

Mutsuko seemed about to start off on a rant, but Yuichi cut her off, worried about leaving the dazed killer unattended for too long. "Hey, Sis, you can tell us all about that later. We should figure out what to do with this guy." He pointed to the killer.

"Good point! We can't leave him like this forever, after all." Mutsuko walked up to the boy and pulled the fake peach out of his mouth.

"Hey, can you talk?"

"...What the hell... are you guys?" he croaked. "You're brutes... worse

than oni...” The hoarseness in his voice was only natural. He’d spent a whole day without food or water. Even if he was an oni, he didn’t appear to be all that different from a human.

“Sorry, but you’re the one who attacked me. Oh, Noro! Bring him some water.”

“You’ve been sending me out to fetch things an awful lot,” Aiko muttered, but she did as she was told, returning with a cup filled with water. The cup came from the club room, and it looked like a wine glass made of silver. There was surely some story behind that, too.

Yuichi took it and poured some water into the boy’s mouth. Choking a little, the boy drank it all down.

“I think I know why you attacked me. Natsuki Takeuchi, right?” There was no point in hiding it now, so he just used Natsuki’s name. Mutsuko already knew about the existence of serial killers, and Kanako wasn’t even listening.

“Huh? Who’s Takeuchi?” asked the boy.

“What?”

After a moment’s thought, the boy put two and two together. It didn’t sound like a ruse; he genuinely didn’t recognize her name. “...Oh, her. So that’s what she calls herself here. Yeah, I made a trade with her. I kill you, I get to use her hunting grounds.”

“The deal’s been called off, so you won’t get anything by killing me now,” Yuichi said firmly. “Got that?”

The boy laughed. “Is that what you think, huh? Like hell! I’m gonna murder every one of you!”

“Yu.” After being silent the whole time, Mutsuko finally broke in.

“What?” Yuichi asked. He turned back to look at her. She was holding a measuring cup full of dried soybeans.

“Mind if I try something?” She grinned eagerly, picked out a bean, and held it up.

“You mean the beans? Sure, knock yourself out.” Yuichi doubted something as simple as throwing beans at him would make a difference just because he was an oni. It was more likely to just annoy him, really.

The oni laughed again, mockingly. “You think those’ll work on me, huh?”

“Oni begone!” Mutsuko threw the bean at him, reciting the standard Setsubun phrase.

It struck the boy’s arm like a bullet, and went out the other side.

Yuichi heard Aiko’s scream even before the boy’s. He winced at the noise, worried that someone might come to check on them.

The newspaper club was probably having activities next door, after all...

That reminded him to check on Kanako, too, but she appeared to have completely severed ties with reality. She was having a conversation with a songbird outside the window.

“Wh-What the hell are you doing? Why would you do that?” he exclaimed.

“I’ve never met a real oni before! So the beans really do work, huh?” Mutsuko nodded to herself, as if making a mental note.

Yuichi plucked a bean from a measuring cup on the floor and threw it at the boy.

“Ow!” It caused the boy to cry out in annoyance, and left a small red mark on his leg where it hit, but no more.

“Hey! Quit playing around!”

“Why did the one you threw have so much piercing power?” Yuichi demanded, ignoring the boy and turning to Mutsuko.

“Maybe it’s a faith thing? Belief is usually what gives these things their power!” she said cheerfully.

Mutsuko made it sound obvious, and it seemed likely enough. Yuichi certainly couldn’t compete with Mutsuko when it came to believing in things.

“By the way, he said he was gonna murder us all. I’m not really feeling that, so maybe we oughta just kill him now!” Mutsuko held up a second bean for the throw. She was aiming at his face. If it hit with the same dramatic force as before, it probably would kill him.

“Hey! Don’t let her do it!” The boy quickly began to panic.

Yuichi raised his hand to urge Mutsuko to stop. Mutsuko lowered her hand, but she was still holding the bean, ready to throw it at any minute.

“Okay. We’re going to make some demands now, got that? First, stop trying to kill any of us.”

“Fine. But how do you know I won’t go back on the deal?” It was a surprisingly forthcoming response; obviously, he would say anything under threat of bean-bullet.

“I don’t, but I’m hoping you’ll be too afraid to come after us. Next time, I won’t show any mercy. My sister will gladly go oni-hunting, Shorty over there will suck out all your blood, and Orihara will gaze up at the sky.”

“I don’t suck blood, and I’m not short!” Aiko shouted indignantly. She didn’t seem to like being reminded of her height.

“I’ll stay away from you for life,” the boy vowed.

“Good. That’s demand number one. Now for number two. I want you to tell us more about Natsuki Takeuchi. What is she? Is she exactly like you? Is she tough?”

“She’s... similar, in that she attacks people, but she’s not like us aboriginal oni. She’s a foreign species.”

“Why do you attack people, anyway?”

“For food. Well, I enjoy it, too, but some of us wring our hands over it a little more.”

“You eat people?!”

“Well, yeah. We’re oni.” He made it sound like you’d have to be stupid to think otherwise.

Yuichi looked back to Mutsuko.

“Yeah. There’re a lot of types of oni, but in Japan, we generally believe that they eat people,” she said.

“Well, it’s kind of like a curse placed on us,” the oni boy said. “Most living things just need a certain amount of nutrients and calories, but we need to eat people. It’s like we’re prisoners of karma.”

“...Can we assume Takeuchi is the same way?” Yuichi asked uneasily. One of his classmates was eating people. It wasn’t an image he wanted to think about, but he still had to ask.

“I think she’s a little different. I think she kills for mental satisfaction or something like that. For our kind, killing people is just a way to eat them. If we have to, we can just eat people who’re already dead. But her kind needs to kill with their own hands.”

Yuichi was a little relieved to hear that. She was still killing people, of course, but whether or not she ate them made a big difference in his perception.

“As for how tough she is... I haven’t seen her fight myself, but she’s probably tougher than me,” the boy continued.

“Why do you think that?”

“My big brother Shuten tried to horn in on her hunting grounds and ended up half dead for his trouble. Shuten’s tougher than I am, so she must be tougher than me.”

“I see.” Unfortunately, just knowing she was tougher than him didn’t really change much. All they could do was just be on their guard.

“That’s about it for me. Do you have any questions, Noro?”

“Huh? Me? I don’t think so...” Aiko was clearly caught off-guard at having the subject suddenly tossed to her.

“What about you, Sis?”

“None from me, either. I think this is your problem, Yu. Of course, I’ll help you however you want me to, but a big sister’s gotta respect her little brother’s independence!”

“Yeah, yeah. So, what do we do with this guy?”

“If you don’t need him anymore, why don’t we let him go?” Mutsuko began untying him without a second thought.

“You heard her,” Yuichi said. “You can go.”

The boy stood up and checked the places where his arms had been bound. His right arm, the one pierced by the bean, didn’t seem to be working. The bleeding had already stopped, but it didn’t seem to be healing immediately, either.

“Hey... just who are you people?”

“We’re the Seishin High School Survival Club! We study knowledge and skills you need to survive in this cruel world! It can help you make it out of disasters, large-scale terrorist strikes, and of course, oni and

yokai attacks!"

"Wait a minute... this is a *survival technique*?" The boy groaned, self-reproachfully. "You've gotta be kidding..." He glared down at the shrine rope and sardines scattered on the floor. Then he sat back down.

"Huh?" Yuichi's jaw dropped.

"So this is like a club, right?" the boy continued. "How about you show me what you've got?"

"What the hell? Get out! No one asked you!" Yuichi shouted after a moment. It was an utterly baffling statement.

"Okay! We'll show you what we've got!" his older sister chimed in.

"Hey!" Yuichi shouted, outraged. Their interrogation was over. The guy had no reason to stay.

"Sorry. Club prez said so." The boy grinned triumphantly.

Yuichi stared forlornly at Mutsuko. He knew that once she had decided on something, it was nearly impossible to get her to change her mind.

"The survival club never turns anyone away!" Mutsuko declared with unnecessary pretension.

"What do you think, Orihara? You've been staring outside this whole time," Yuichi said.

"What was that, Sakaki? Hmm? I didn't see anything!"

"That's right, you didn't see anything. So come over here and we'll start our club activities."

"Oh, but..." Kanako was still gazing outside. She didn't even gesture at looking into the room.

"It's okay. You probably thought there was a boy tied up in here who peed himself, but it was just your imagination."

"Really? Was it really?"

"Yes, it really was. Come back in and look!" At Mutsuko's urging, Kanako turned back.

"Eek!" She let out a little scream at the sight of the blond boy.

"Don't worry, that's just a friend of Yu's. You probably thought you saw him lying on the floor before, but it was just your imagination."

"Was it? Was it really my imagination?"

"It really was. You're such a worrywart, Orihara. You're gonna be in big trouble if you ever get sent to an isekai for real."

"Y-Yes, you're right. I could never survive in an isekai like this. I really must be braver."

That's how you convince her?! Yuichi thought as he slammed his face down on the table.

The main club table was made up of two long, narrow folding tables stuck together. Aiko, Yuichi, and the blond boy sat together on one side.

Across from them sat Mutsuko, and — after being led back to reality — Kanako.

“Okay! Club activities, commence!”

“Wait a minute!” Yuichi interrupted, holding up his hand.

“I never said I wanted to join the survival club. Neither did Noro.” He figured it was no use, but he’d at least try to resist.

“Oh, really? Now that you mention it, you never filled out the forms... So let’s do that now!” Mutsuko ran off and came back with the submission forms, which she laid out in front of the two.

As expected, they weren’t getting out of here without joining the club.

“...Fine, I’ll join... but can I be in two clubs?”

“Hmm? If you want to... is there another club you wanted to join, Yu?”

“Choir club.”

“Huh? Why?” Aiko asked, sitting up in surprise. She looked like she never would have dreamed that choir club would be his first choice.

“Huh? Why is that weird? I just want to play the piano.”

“You play the piano, Sakaki?” Aiko asked in amazement.

“Yeah, it’s a hobby. Is that a problem? We only have an electric keyboard at home, though, so I’d really like to try a real one..” Yuichi had taken piano lessons through elementary school, and he still enjoyed playing the electric keyboard. Both of his sisters had also started lessons, but given up immediately.

“Noro, do you have another club you want to join, too?”

“I guess I hadn’t really thought about it...”

“Then you can join the survival club! Participation in club activities is totally voluntary! You can just show up on the days when you feel like it! Like, Orihara and I are the only ones who came today!”

“Yeah, what’s up with that? How can you have activities with just the president and vice president?”

“So if you also want to join the choir club, Yu, you can!”

“Fine. I guess I don’t mind just being on the roll. Is that good enough?”

“Same here...” Aiko spoke up hesitantly.

They both signed the submission forms, and Mutsuko took them, smiling brightly.

“Okay, let’s make it official. Actually, I feel like I’m saying that a lot today... But anyway, welcome to the survival club!”

“Yeah, okay,” Yuichi said.

“It’s a pleasure to be here,” Aiko added.

Yuichi’s response was perfunctory, whereas Aiko’s seemed relatively earnest.

“Well, shall we begin with member introductions?” Mutsuko asked.

“Oh, come on...” Yuichi groaned. He already knew everyone, so it just seemed like a waste of time.

“Okay, I’ll start,” she said. “Mutsuko Sakaki! I’m the club president!

My specialty is fictional martial arts! Okay, Orihara, you're next!" Mutsuko urged.

Kanako stood up and gave a short bow in greeting. "I am Kanako Orihara. I am the club's vice president. My specialty is isekai."

"Got it! Yu, you're next."

"Yuichi Sakaki," he grumbled.

"Aw, is that all?" Mutsuko frowned.

"I don't have a specialty."

"Well, okay. Next, Noro."

"Okay. I'm Aiko Noro. I don't know if I have a specialty, but my hobby is making sweets. It's a pleasure to be here."

"Got it. Nice to have you! Now you, oni guy." Mutsuko pointed to the oni boy.

"Huh? You want me to do one?" He seemed surprised at being addressed.

"That's right. It would be sad if you hung out here and we didn't even know your name!"

"Fine... I'm Kyoshiro Ibaraki. I'm fifteen years old. If I were in high school, I'd be a first-year."

"You mean you're not? But you wore a school uniform, didn't you?"

"That was just camouflage to blend in with humans. People like us don't go to normal high schools. That girl... Takeuchi, did you call her? She's about the only one I know who does go out of her way to go to school."

Yuichi looked at the boy — apparently named Ibaraki — again. "Ibaraki-doji" was now the label above his head. It was different from before. Maybe because he now knew he and Natsuki were different species... or maybe Natsuki's would also become more specific the next time he saw her. He couldn't be sure just yet.

"Well, introductions over. Let's get started!" Mutsuko stood up and pulled up the whiteboard.

She pulled out a black marker and wrote "Isekai Survival Ideas" on it.

"What is that?" Aiko asked, hesitantly.

"Hmm? We're going to brainstorm ideas about how to survive if you ended up in an isekai. Another world! You know, like with time travel, or dimension hopping!"

"Is there any point to that? I could understand figuring out how to survive an earthquake, or even a nuclear war, but dimension hopping?"

"You can't prove it doesn't happen, so it clearly does!" Mutsuko spoke up with perfect confidence.

Yuichi supposed it was true that he had no proof that people couldn't travel dimensions...

"We have a lot of beginners here today, so we'll start simple. I mean, figuring out what to do if you traveled to a world full of silicon-based

lifeforms would probably be a little advanced."

"Is this really a subject you can have an advanced perspective in?"

"So let's consider an isekai where the Japanese language and Japanese common sense applies. Say... if you traveled back in time to the Warring States Period! Orihara, please lead the discussion. Noro, you keep the minutes."

"Huh? Me? But I've never done that before..."

"It's okay. Just write down what you can. We'll help you fill in whatever you've missed." She slid her a pen and notepad.

"Right. I will now lead the discussion. Thank you all for coming. I'll get right to the point. There are quite a few works that deal with travel to the Warring States Period." Kanako began writing names on the whiteboard.

"Ryo Hanmura's *G.I. Samurai.* This is a famous novel that has been adapted into a TV show and a feature film. It's about the Self-Defense Forces traveling to the Warring States Period. Mikage Kasuga's *The Ambition of Oda Nobuna.* This is a light novel that has been adapted into an anime. The protagonist travels into a Warring States-like world where the famous generals are all girls. *A Chef of Nobunaga,* written by Mitsuru Nishimura and drawn by Takuro Kajikawa. This is a manga that was also adapted into a TV show. It's about a chef from modern day Japan who travels into the Warring States Period and ends up serving Nobunaga. This list is not comprehensive, but there are so many works you can buy conventionally, and if we added web novels, it would just get overwhelming. Nobunaga-centric novels have been growing in popularity lately, so we'll discuss it from that vantage point for now. What should you do if you found yourself in Nobunaga's army?"

Orihara seemed so meek and unassuming most of the time. Yuichi was astonished by how easily the words poured out of her mouth.

Aiko's eyes had gone wide. She seemed to be feeling the same way.

Despite how she looks, she's still a friend of my sister...

ISEKAI FANATIC
Isekai
Surviv
Ideas

"The works I mentioned are adequate for providing a basic image of the time period, but they are still works of fiction, so they feature some dramatization. All stories take liberties to make things more interesting. So what do we do if we want to know more about the real Nobunaga? We consult historical texts. For this, the best primary source is *The Chronicle of Lord Nobunaga,* written by Gyuichi Ota, an actual vassal of Nobunaga's. In other words, this is a work written by someone who saw Nobunaga in action first-hand. Several copies of this work were made, and they all have subtle differences, so it cannot be taken completely at face value, but it's still the best historical document about Nobunaga that we have.

"Oh, and don't make a mistake and read *The Record of Lord Nobunaga* instead. That's a novel written by a Confucian scholar named Hoan Oze, *based* on the *Chronicle.* His story is the reason people think that the battle of Okehazama took place in a valley when Okehazama is, in fact, a mountain. If you read *The Chronicle of Lord Nobunaga,* it clearly says 'Mt. Okehazama.' This falsehood became pervasive because the *Record* was a bestseller in the Edo Period. Other works were created based off of it, and it gradually spread, until it became one of the fundamental images associated with Nobunaga. But if you end up traveling back there with these fictionalized images in your mind, you'll get confused, so we base our premises on factual history as much as possible.

"Now, to our main subject: Personally, I believe that it would be foolish to choose to work for Nobunaga. He was an erratic man, subject to violent whims, which led to him putting many of his own followers and vassals to death. This is a hard thing to sugarcoat, so works that deal with Nobunaga as protagonist tend to leave it out. Of course, if we go with the assumption that you won't have much of a conversation, let's assume you manage to conduct yourself flawlessly in Nobunaga's service. In that case, there are several major points of note: the Battle of Okehazama, the Honno-ji Incident, and the Siege of Kanegasaki. We'll start with these. If you want to make it through these events alive..."

A single thought pervaded Yuichi's mind. *How exactly is this for beginners?!*

Chapter 8: What Do You Say When Someone Tells You They're Writing a Novel?

Kanako's lecture continued, uninterrupted. No one could get a word in edgewise. Granted, Yuichi didn't know anything about the subject to begin with...

She'd started with Nobunaga, but gradually got off the subject, shifting from Shimazu's *sutegamari* retreat strategy to the bravery of Nabeshima's warriors in Saga, and on to the *Hagakure* from there.

Yuichi had his doubts that such information would ever be useful in an isekai situation, but Kanako seemed to have a lot of fun talking about it, and Mutsuko enjoyed listening, so it was harmless enough.

"Oh, look at the time!" Mutsuko said, looking at the clock in the club room.

Yuichi took a glance out the window. The sky was already turning red. It was well after 6 PM.

"Well? How'd you like the survival club?!" she exclaimed.

"It's about what I was expecting, given the way you always talk about it."

Mutsuko had generally told him what kind of things went on in the survival club. If he was being totally honest, the in-person experience had been a bit different, but he was feeling surly and dismissive.

"Huh? Where'd Noro go, anyway?" he added.

She had been handling the secretary's duties, but it was Ibaraki who was writing the minutes now. Aiko was nowhere to be seen.

"Why are you keeping the record?" Yuichi asked.

"Shorty asked me to take over. Didn't you see her go wandering off?" Ibaraki was more conscientious than Yuichi had expected.

He thought back, and remembered Aiko leaving her seat. Maybe she'd gone to the bathroom?

Mutsuko was abashed. "I meant for it to be for beginners, but..." Maybe she thought she had made a mistake.

Yuichi was accustomed to the information dump, so it hadn't bothered him, but being on the receiving end of a speech like that without warning might have been too much for Aiko. He felt a little bad for neglecting her, too.

"U-Um, I'm sorry. I guess having all that thrown at you at once would be a bit incomprehensible..." Kanako was flustered and

apologetic. Like Mutsuko, the thought of scaring off a potential club member seemed to have depressed her.

"Ah, um, I don't know much about the Warring States Period, but the story about the starving guy who stole rice taxes rather than kill himself was really interesting," Yuichi said quickly, trying to make Kanako feel better. He knew Mutsuko could handle herself, but it bothered him to see the mild-mannered Kanako look so sad.

"R-Really? That's good. Then next time I'll talk about traveling to Europe in the Middle Ages!"

Yuichi wasn't sure why Kanako was so obsessed with isekai, but it was hard to begrudge her anything when she smiled so gently.

"Oh, that's right, Orihara. Would you show Yu and his friend the thing?" Mutsuko piped up.

"Ah? The thing? The thing? But..."

"It'll be fine! You need people to look at it! You won't improve without feedback!"

"...Okay. Umm... Er... I'm writing a novel," she stammered bashfully.

What am I supposed to say to that? There was nothing more awkward than having someone tell you, to your face, that they were writing a novel.

"Whoa, cool!"

But Ibaraki was apparently sincerely impressed.

"Do you even read novels?" Yuichi asked. It was hard to imagine Ibaraki being all that into literature.

"Sure, sometimes."

"Western books, right?"

"Is that a crack about my looks? Let's see... The most recent thing I read was *The Travels of Prince Takaoka.*"

"Yeah, look, I know I asked, but I don't actually care what you read."

"...Hey, that kind of hurt, y'know..."

Yuichi ignored the sulking Ibaraki and resumed speaking to Kanako. "Um, are you writing one of those isekai novels? What's the title?" Yuichi asked. He couldn't just ignore her after dismissing Ibaraki's interest.

"Um, the title is *My Demon Lord is Too Cute to Kill and Now the World is in Danger!*"

"I can't really imagine what that would entail..." Yuichi felt a little disappointed. He'd been hoping she might have written something a little cuter.

"Summarizing it is too embarrassing, so please, just read it."

His feelings sank. Now he'd have to read it and tell her what he thought.

"Hey, how long are you gonna stick around, anyway?" Yuichi demanded of Ibaraki, who was was still sitting there. He didn't like the

how easily he was blending in with the group.

"Hmm? Club's over, right? Guess I'll head home, then."

"I don't know what you were trying to accomplish here, but remember your promise, okay? Never come after us again."

"Got it. I don't feel like it anymore, anyway... oh hey, phone's ringing." Ibaraki picked up the cell phone Yuichi had taken out of his pocket and placed on the table when he undressed him.

"Oh, it's you. Huh? I couldn't pick up before. What does it matter?" Ibaraki cast a surreptitious glance at Yuichi. "I just got bored. And I realized what a pain in the ass it'd be to clean up after killing him in a place like this, so that snapped me out of it. Yeah, you'd better believe that's all. Later." Ibaraki cut off the call in annoyance.

Then it was Yuichi's cell phone that rang. He recognized the number. It was Natsuki Takeuchi.

"Hello, Sakaki." Maybe the reception was bad, because her voice was mixed with static.

"You took off today, right? I wanted to talk to you, so I'm glad you called."

"The reason I took off is because I'm preparing to slaughter everyone, just like I promised."

"Hey..."

She giggled. "Just kidding. I could still do that if you force my hand... but right now it's just you and Noro who know about it, right?"

Yuichi clenched his teeth. So she did know about Aiko.

"So, what will you do?"

"If it were just you, Sakaki, I wouldn't mind letting things stand. But... two or more people is a problem. The secret could continue to leak out."

"So what do you plan to do?"

"Good question. I thought I might just kill you and Noro."

"Oh, come on!"

"You're the one who broke the promise. So you choose. Will you both die, or do I kill everyone connected to the school? Tomorrow's the deadline."

"You do whatever you want to. Kill everyone? There's no way you could."

"I see. I thought you might say that. And perhaps it would suit you to run away and leave the others to their fate."

"You can't possibly kill everyone."

"I'm not lying, but I won't try to convince you of that now. Let's talk about you two instead. Killing everyone is just a last resort, reserved for when I reach a state of such despair that I'd happily see the world end. So I'd really prefer to just kill the two of you, if possible."

"Um, still, it's not like we're going to blindly submit to being killed."

"I told you I wouldn't hunt people who I see in my everyday life. Is

that why you think you can act like this? It is true, but at this rate, I'm thinking I may never get my peaceful, quiet life back at all."

"Like I care!"

"So, Sakaki, I want you to come to my hunting ground. Anything goes there."

"You really think I'll go there of my own free will?"

"Well, Noro is already here."

"What?!" Yuichi looked around the room again. Aiko still hadn't returned. She'd been gone far too long. She'd left her bag behind, too, so she couldn't have just gone home without them...

"Let me explain to you my plan. I'm going to kill Noro at midnight tonight. If you come before then, I'll kill you with her. If you don't come... I guess Noro will die, and things will go back to the way they were? I don't mind if you're the only one who knows my secret, and I think killing Noro should scare you into compliance. That's my assumption, anyway."

"You... You're crazy!" Who but a madwoman would say something like that so casually?

"Oh, if you're going to come, leave a letter behind, would you? It's a little old-fashioned, but elopement makes for a nice cover story."

"Is Noro okay?" he demanded.

"Yes. She's unconscious. She would get annoying if I woke her up, so I can't put her on the phone, but don't worry. I won't harm her in any way, aside from killing her later."

"...So where are your 'hunting grounds'?"

Natsuki told him the address. "So long. I hope you'll come, but I won't count on it." With that, she hung up.

"Hey, that sounded pretty tense. What's going on?" Ibaraki asked, perhaps thinking Yuichi was acting oddly.

"It's pretty bad... She's got Noro."

"Huh? You mean the shrimp? She's only been gone a few minutes, though. Did she really come all the way to school?"

"How should I know? But if Noro's missing, then obviously she did!"

She'd said Aiko was unconscious. If she wanted to keep her as a hostage, she should be fine for now. But Yuichi still felt anxious without confirmation.

He was the one who had gotten Aiko mixed up in this. He couldn't just let her die.

"Maybe I could talk to her... She did say she could let it slide if I was the only one who knew. If I could make a case for the merits of not killing anyone..." Though their relationship had walked a knife's edge from the start, Natsuki had always been civil, at least. If she thought there was a way to avoid anyone dying, she might be willing to talk it out.

"Oh, please. You were more than happy to fight me."

“Yeah, because you never gave me time to talk!”

“Haha, true ’nuff.”

Yuichi sighed and hung his head. In his peripheral vision, he could see his sister fidgeting anxiously.

Ah... She wants to comment...

Yuichi looked to his sister. She had said before that she would let him decide how he wanted to handle things. She clearly wasn’t going to intervene unless Yuichi gave her permission first, but her entire body language screamed, “Let me speak!”

Guess I don’t have a choice...

“Sis, I need your help.”

“Okay!” Her face burst into a smile.

“My big sister has middle school syndrome,” Yuichi said, replying to Ibaraki’s question.

“Yu, that’s horrible! Accusing your big sister of having middle school syndrome...” Mutsuko huffed angrily.

That’s right, she doesn’t realize it... People with middle school syndrome often didn’t.

They were in a family restaurant. Yuichi, in his uniform, sat side by side with Ibaraki, who was wearing Yuichi’s gym clothes. Mutsuko sat alone, across from them both.

They had started heading for the place that Natsuki had told him to come, but when their stomachs began grumbling, they had found themselves here.

Yuichi wasn’t really in the mood for a long meal, but Mutsuko had ordered a steak set for three, insisting that you couldn’t wage war on an empty stomach, and also that she would pay.

“You mean the whole ‘I have the power of dark flames, my right arm’s going berserk’ deal?” Ibaraki asked, apparently rather educated about the subject.

“Hey! I stopped doing that stuff in kindergarten. Give me a break!”

“You believe in magic sight and oni!”

“That’s different! It’s stupid to make up stuff that isn’t even happening!” Mutsuko said heatedly. It seemed she was oddly practical when it came to her fantasies. She was quick to dismiss things that were provably untrue.

“See?” Yuichi sighed.

“See what?” Ibaraki responded.

Realizing that it was less than self-explanatory, Yuichi elaborated. “In other words, my sister pursues middle school-style daydreams within the realm of what can practically be accomplished. And most of the time, she uses me as her guinea pig!” He couldn’t exactly start screaming in a family restaurant, but he did raise his voice a little at the end. The cry of the long-suffering.

“Oh, Yu! All I’m doing is training you to be the strongest man in the world. It makes me sad to hear you talk that way.” Mutsuko shot him an exaggerated pout.

“Yeah... Well... Sounds like you’ve had a rough life.” Ibaraki patted Yuichi’s shoulder in sympathy.

Just then, a plate was deposited in front of him, containing an ostentatiously thick slab of steak. Mutsuko seemed to want Yuichi to eat meat. Or at least, fill him with protein.

“There’re a few things I want to ask you, too,” Yuichi said to Ibaraki. If he was going to be forced to sit and eat, he wanted to make good use of his time.

“Sure, ask me anything. No point in hiding things now.”

“First, about the place we’re going. Do you know anything about it?” Yuichi showed him the address he’d written down. It was the place Natsuki had told him to go.

“It’s full of shabby old guys rambling around. Awful place. But you live in the area, so you probably know that much, right?” The place Natsuki had invited them to was one of Japan’s few true slums. It was a nest of day laborers and homeless people, and famous for the occasional outbreaks of violence that happened there.

“That’s her hunting ground, huh?”

It wouldn’t be unusual for one or two people to die or go missing in the area, thought Yuichi.

“I know what you’re probably thinking, so let me make one thing clear,” Ibaraki said. “I’d never hunt grimy types like that. The hunting grounds I asked her for were somewhere else.”

“Um, I was thinking about Takeuchi. Why would I ever be thinking about you?”

“Why are you so mean to me all the time?!”

“You kill people and eat them. We’re never gonna be friends.”

Mutsuko watched the two argue with amusement.

“Okay, next. I didn’t hear all the details at the school, but you said Takeuchi was a foreign breed of whatever you are, right? So she’s like an oni or a vampire or a yokai; she should have a weak point.”

“Sure, but if I knew it, she wouldn’t be able to boss me around.”

“So what’s the name of her race? Do you know?”

If he did, Yuichi hoped, Mutsuko might be able to offer up some advice.

“She’s a Jack the Ripper.”

Yuichi stared for a moment in silence. Jack the Ripper was a serial killer, sure, but he was from the past, and from another country. What did that have to do with anything? After the brief hesitation, he prompted, “Sorry, I don’t understand what that means.”

“Yeah, well, neither do I,” Ibaraki smirked.

“You asshole!” Annoyed with his carefree attitude, Yuichi gave

Ibaraki a light smack.

"Oh, the friendship which sprouts after a hard-fought battle!" Mutsuko said cheerfully.

"What friendship?!" Yuichi cried.

"Yeah! I like him, y'know?" Ibaraki put his arm around Yuichi's shoulders, while Yuichi scowled openly.

"Well, I honestly don't know. Neither does my clan. She just has a similar nature, what with having turf and prey and stuff just like us. We figure there's gotta be a connection. That's what the others say, so it must be true, right? I mean, there are other serial killers, like that Ed Gein guy, right? Maybe she's a reincarnation of him or something? But when it came to him, I don't know if the killing was the point or just a way to make his sick works of art."

"Ed Gein!" Mutsuko's eyes sparkled.

"Uh, Sis, I know it's one of your favorite subjects, but let's not get hung up on that right now."

"The legendary serial killer who inspired *Silence of the Lambs* and *Psycho*! He chopped up people's bodies and made things from them! He had lampshades made from skin and soup bowls made from skulls! And vests made from human skin, and he really wore them! And—"

"Stop! This is no topic for a family restaurant!" Yuichi leaned over the table and clamped a hand over Mutsuko's mouth. Mutsuko kept talking even with her mouth covered, seeming to enjoy herself.

"Anyway, back to the subject at hand. You're saying Takeuchi is a reincarnation of Jack the Ripper?"

"I'm telling you, I don't know!" Ibaraki shot back. Whether he didn't know any more or just refused to say, the subject seemed to be over as far as Ibaraki was concerned.

"So? Are you a foreigner or what?" Since the subject was closed, Yuichi decided to satisfy his other curiosity. The guy was blond with blue eyes and deep-set features. He definitely looked foreign, but he spoke Japanese fluently.

"I was born and bred in Japan, okay? I guess our ancestors might have been foreigners who washed ashore, though." Ibaraki spoke emphatically, apparently happy to get asked about himself.

"Oh, sorry. I figured I'd ask, but I wasn't actually that interested."

"Why, you..." Ibaraki slumped in disappointment.

"Speaking of which, he had 'Serial Killer' over his head at first just like Takeuchi, right? Is there any connection?" Mutsuko spoke up, a little late to the party.

Yuichi glanced over. Right now, it said "Ibaraki-doji" over his head, but originally, it had said "Serial Killer II."

"It must, right? Jack the Ripper is definitely a serial killer, and Ibaraki is an Ibaraki-doji... in other words, an oni who needs to kill people to eat them, so that basically makes him a serial killer. I guess

they're two forms of the same thing. One does monstrous things, while the other is a literal monster..."

Mutsuko added her own commentary, but she couldn't help in unraveling the mystery. Yuichi's labels were just too imprecise.

"How can we have multiple serial killers living here, anyway?" he asked. "Someone dying should be a huge story. Why don't we hear all about it when you kill someone?"

"Come on, man. Do you know how many people go missing across Japan every year? About 80,000. About 20% of those are children, most of them runaways. If someone goes missing out of the blue one day and doesn't come back, you don't necessarily find out what happened to them. Well, as it happens, a lot of them get eaten by us. So in a way, they're bringing it on themselves. If you walk the straight and narrow, you don't ever cross paths with people like us. And of course, we work hard to make sure no one finds out about us, either."

Ibaraki seemed to really believe what he was saying. It was like he was living in a world with a completely different moral code.

"So where does attacking a straight-and-narrow teenager in the middle of his high school fit into this?"

"Well, I figured I could do it without causing much fuss."

"Well you sure failed at that! You trashed the school!"

"Huh? Pretty sure you're the one who did the trashing, man..."

Yuichi immediately looked away, trying to play innocent.

"Well, I'm heading home," Ibaraki announced as they were leaving the restaurant.

"Oh, yeah? About time," Yuichi commented.

"Man, you're so cold. Aren't you picking up my love beams?"

"Sorry, Yu, but I'm not into BL! I hope you'll consider a pure and true hetero relationship!" Mutsuko said cheerfully.

Yuichi took a conspicuous step back.

"Huh? Hey, don't take that seriously! But aren't you gonna ask why I'm leaving?"

"No, but I bet you're gonna tell us," Yuichi muttered. "Let's get this over with."

"...Hey, Yuichi's sis, is your little brother always like this?"

"I think he's just bashful!"

"I'm not. So what's the reason?"

"Because I like you guys. If I head up to Takeuchi's place, I'll have to turn on you. I got a reputation to think about, after all. But if I tell her I just went home on a whim, it's probably fine. So long. I'll wash the uniform and return i—"

"Keep it and stay out of my life."

Ibaraki sighed. "So unapproachable. Oh, well. See you later." With that, Ibaraki left.

“Later. Wait, what ever happened to ‘keep away forever’?”

Still, Ibaraki acted like he’d see them again... That meant he didn’t think Yuichi was about to die. There was something reassuring about that.

“Now, this is no time for tearful goodbyes! Let’s track down that serial killer!” Mutsuko proclaimed, merrily.

*****

When she woke up, Aiko found herself on her side, her cheek pressed up against a cold, hard floor.

There was a low, whirring noise in the air. There was a strange bright light in front of her, but she couldn’t quite tell what she was looking at.

Her vision was hazy and her thoughts were jumbled.

“Oh, you’re awake?” Aiko slowly sat up and looked in the direction of the voice. As her eyes focused, she could just make out someone standing in the light. It was a girl wearing the Seishin High School uniform.

Natsuki Takeuchi was looking down at Aiko.

Aiko couldn’t figure out what was going on. She had no idea where she was, and her memories of getting there were in a total fog.

Aiko looked around. They seemed to be in a factory, but everything except for the open, lit-up space they were in was so dark that she couldn’t be sure.

Aiko checked herself next. Her uniform was covered in something like dust. The place must not get cleaned very often.

Her consciousness was gradually returning to her. Aiko remembered...

She remembered leaving her seat to head for the bathroom because Orihara’s lecture was so incomprehensible. She remembered noticing that the bathrooms in the old building contained nothing but dirty squat toilets, so she’d headed for the ones in the gym. She remembered doing her business and getting ready to go back to the club room, when something suddenly caught her around the neck, and...

This is... really bad, huh...

Natsuki thought that Aiko knew her secret. She had been trying to erase people who knew her secret...

“Hey... Takeuchi. Would you tell me what’s going on?” She decided to quietly probe at her abductor’s state of mind.

“The truth is, I wanted to abduct both of you,” Natsuki said. “I can’t have you dying at the school or in the city, but once I’ve brought you here, I can do anything I want with you. So I was watching the school, wondering how I would go about kidnapping both of you at once, when I caught sight of you, all alone. That’s when I realized that one was

enough."

Yeah, I figured she did this because she found out I knew about her!

"So I infiltrated the bathroom and got you in a chokehold from behind. Then you lost consciousness and I brought you here."

It didn't make a lot of sense to Aiko, but it explained why she remembered being strangled.

"Hey... Takeuchi, what are you trying to accomplish?" She couldn't really figure out why she had been kidnapped. If Natsuki just wanted her quiet, she would have killed her already. But she had just been left on the floor. She wasn't even tied up.

"I want to have a peaceful school life," Natsuki responded. "A normal life surrounded by normal friends, having fun in the normal way. But not one day in, that all came crashing down. What would you do if you were me, Noro?"

Natsuki didn't even seem to be listening for a response. She just seemed to be saying whatever she wanted to say.

"Um, I won't tell anyone, so you could let me go... couldn't you?" Aiko gave Natsuki her best puppy-dog eyes, even though she figured it was likely to be ineffective against a girl.

"No," Natsuki said flatly.

"But we've talked a lot, you know? Aren't we friends? Um, you know I'll protect my friend's secret!" Setting aside the ethical and legal issues for now, she was pretty sure she could keep the secret. She had a dark secret of her own, after all, being a vampire. She had a certain amount of sympathy for the other girl's situation.

"Yeah, I thought we might be good friends too, Noro. It's a shame."

"No, no, no, don't say that! We can still be... friends, you know?!" Aiko decided to push the friendship angle harder. Natsuki did sound like she really wanted friends, after all.

"Have you even been listening to me, Noro?" Natsuki asked disdainfully.

Aiko wasn't sure what she had done to deserve this scorn. "Yeah, I have. You said you wanted to have fun at school with your friends, right? If you'd just knock it off and become friends with me and Sakaki, you wouldn't have to do this!"

"I told you I want *normal* friends. Get it? I can't be friends with weirdos who don't mind being friends with a serial killer. I mean, honestly. Any normal, law-abiding citizen would call the police on me right away."

"Huh?"

Well, that explained it. Natsuki Takeuchi was crazy. Hearing a crazy person call *her* weird really got under Aiko's skin. The friend strategy didn't seem to be working, so Aiko gave up on it.

She sighed. "So can I at least get you to explain why you kidnapped me?"

“To kill you. Why else?” Natsuki said it so casually, it didn’t seem real.

Aiko was alone in a room with a serial killer. She should have been more afraid, but Aiko didn’t feel much fear at all. She still couldn’t quite believe that Natsuki was a serial killer, probably because they were basically talking like they always had.

“You know... I could just run away.” Aiko wasn’t actually tied up. She was awake and alert and uninjured. If she wanted to run, she could do so at any time.

But Natsuki quickly doused those hopes. The girl who had been standing some distance away appeared in front of her in the blink of an eye. She flicked Aiko’s forehead with a finger.

“Ow.” Aiko unwittingly put her hands to her forehead.

“You’re free because I had confidence that I could catch you if I had to. Want to test that theory?”

“No, thanks...” Aiko scooted backwards a little ways. It was clear that she couldn’t take her.

I may be a vampire, but it’s no help at all in this situation... Maybe she could make it if she sucked some of Natsuki’s blood, but Natsuki was so much stronger, it was doubtful that she could even make it to the bite.

“Well, stay nice and quiet and you might get to survive until midnight,” Natsuki said offhandedly.

Aiko checked her wristwatch. It was 9:00 at night. That didn’t give her much time. “Why until midnight?”

“I called Sakaki. If he’s not here by midnight, I’ll kill you. Now, once he gets here, I’ll kill you both, so you might actually live longer if he stays away. What do you think? Will Sakaki come?”

Common sense dictated that he wouldn’t. Why would anyone come out just to be killed? That was probably why Natsuki had asked.

But Aiko responded without a doubt in her mind. “Of course he’ll come.”

“Huh?” Natsuki responded incredulously.

But Aiko was sure. She hadn’t known him long. She couldn’t claim to know everything about him. But she knew that, in this situation, the boy named Yuichi would come.

That was the reason she had been so calm before. She knew Yuichi would come to save her. It was the most natural thing in the world. “I mean, the hero always comes to save his love interest when she’s been captured by a killer!”

“Oh, spare me your embarrassing cliches,” Natsuki shot back, dryly.

“Right, sorry. Pretend I didn’t say that! I kind of embarrassed myself, too.” Aiko felt embarrassed about calling herself the love interest, and turned her eyes away.

But... even if I’m not the love interest, Sakaki will still come for me. That was the one thing Aiko knew for sure.

Chapter 9: At Last! The Battle Against Serial Killer I

Yuichi and Mutsuko followed Natsuki's directions and arrived at the designated town. It was a slum full of homeless people, about an hour by train away from their hometown of Seishin.

They used their cell phone GPSes to find the exact location, which turned out to be a run-down old factory.

One would expect an abandoned factory to be full of homeless people looking for shelter, but that didn't seem to be the case here. The building was silent and still.

Yuichi and Mutsuko headed inside, still on high alert.

Steel beams and materials lay around, suggesting a former metalworking plant.

Though the power seemed to be shut off, they could still see a light ahead. There was a low sound like the whir of turbines. Possibly a home generator.

They entered and walked toward the light until they saw a girl in a high school uniform. She was watching them with a sharp gaze.

Natsuki Takeuchi was standing at the center of a wide open space lit by blindingly bright lights.

Aiko was sitting at her feet. She wasn't tied up and didn't seem to be injured.

"Sakaki!" The moment she saw Yuichi, Aiko stood up and ran straight for him. Natsuki didn't try to stop her, but just watched her go.

Aiko threw her arms around Yuichi.

"Hey, are you okay?" he asked. She seemed pretty terrified. Yuichi patted her head gently.

"Yeah, I'm okay... Um, sorry I got caught." Aiko's momentary smile clouded over with regret.

"Don't sweat it. You're okay, and that's all I care about." He looked her up and down, but he didn't see anything wrong with her beyond a dusty uniform.

"Oh my, Noro! How forward of you!" Mutsuko exclaimed.

Mutsuko's words snapped Aiko back to reality. She quickly tore away from Yuichi as if she had realized what she was doing.

The hug had felt a little odd to Yuichi, so he was kind of relieved. But just then, he noticed the label above Aiko's head.

It read "Love Interest."

When did that happen?

"What does 'love interest' mean?" Yuichi murmured, sounding it out like a punchline.

"Y-You heard that?!" Aiko cried out, her face turning scarlet.

"Huh? I just mean, your label says 'love interest' now..."

Aiko swept her hands over her head as if trying to erase the words. It didn't disappear, but as she worked at it, Mutsuko linked her arms behind her back and strolled into Yuichi's line of sight, humming.

"What are you doing, Sis?" he asked, silently wishing she wouldn't sabotage the mood.

"Come on, what does my label say?" she asked.

"Huh? It says 'Big Sister,' like always."

"Oh, come on!" Mutsuko groused. "If you're the protagonist, and Noro's a love interest, then I should be a love interest, too!"

"Um, you are my real sister, aren't you?"

"Yes! We're siblings, no question! There's not gonna be any 'not related by blood' twist later on!"

"Then don't you find that idea weird?!"

"Why can't your sister be the love interest?" Mutsuko pouted at him.

Yuichi pushed her aside to step forward. He could hear her behind him, still sulking, but he was relieved that she wouldn't do anything more to get in his way.

"Anyway, you two get back. I'll deal with the rest."

"Noro! I think that spot should be good. It's just the right height for sitting." Mutsuko pointed to a mountain of steel materials, and the two sat down.

Yuichi checked to make sure they were at a safe distance, then began walking towards Natsuki.

They were about ten meters apart now, facing each other.

"Jack the Ripper," her label read. The serial killer who had terrorized England in the year 1888. The case had gone unsolved, and the killer's identity remained unknown. Who could say what his weakness might have been?

Mutsuko didn't know the truth behind the incidents either, but... "Over a hundred years have passed since then. So maybe the legend gave rise to some sort of yokai!" she had said with great interest.

Of course, it wasn't Natsuki Takeuchi herself who had committed those murders. She didn't even look English. Despite her exotic features, she was clearly Japanese.

"Good evening. All done with your emotional reunion?" she asked.

"I'm surprised you let her go so easily. I thought you would want to hold her hostage," Yuichi commented. He had assumed she would want to use Aiko to keep him docile, but apparently not. On the other hand, that might also be a sign of how confident Natsuki was. If so, that could

spell a new kind of trouble.

"My time and energy are valuable. Getting a rope all ready and tying her up would just have been so much trouble. And I don't need to do that to finish you."

"I can tell you're really confident. But wouldn't it still be more efficient to use a hostage as a shield to kill me? That would save you a lot of time and energy, too."

"True, but killing a defenseless person just isn't satisfying, sorry to say. So if you're tied up, or if you can't resist because I have a hostage, the kill doesn't do a thing for me. I mean obviously it doesn't make a difference if I'm killing you to shut you up, but why not sate my hunger while I'm at it?"

"You're telling me an awful lot."

"You're about to die, so I can say whatever I want."

"Takeuchi, no! That's a red flag!" Mutsuko exclaimed. "The 'You can take that to hell with you' line is a sign that you're about to lose!"

"Who is she?" Natsuki looked at Mutsuko in puzzlement. She must have expected him to come alone.

"That's my big sister. I accidentally told her your identity, so I brought her along."

"Oh? You did that for me? How considerate... By the way, did you leave a letter behind before you came?"

"No way. I came here to talk. I'm sure we can find a compromise to get out of this without killing anybody."

"Hmm, all right. Do you have a cell phone? That might be more natural. You can just send an email to your parents later... Hmm, but your sister being here complicates things." Natsuki exuded casual confidence, seemingly thinking that everything was going her way.

"Hey... What is this place?" Yuichi asked. Since Natsuki wasn't engaging at all, he was going to move on to another subject. His first objective was to get her talking to him. He needed some way to hook her.

"It's our coliseum."

"Huh?" Yuichi was dumbstruck. That was the last thing he had expected to hear.

"You think I hunt the local homeless? You think I'm an indiscriminate killer?" she asked.

"You mean you're not?" Yuichi had just assumed that when he heard this was her hunting ground. This place saw several hundreds of deaths by freezing and starvation every year. It would be easy enough for her to mix her killings in with that.

"How rude. I feel insulted. You think I kill defenseless opponents? Sure, I'm a killer, but I still try very hard to blend in with society. I don't cause unnecessary suffering, and I don't kill people who aren't prepared to die."

“Noro wasn’t ready to die, but you were going to kill her.”

“That falls under the category of ‘necessary suffering.’ It’s a completely separate issue from sating myself.”

Yuichi decided to give up on understanding her logic. He wasn’t going to get into the mind of a serial killer.

“This is a coliseum where the fearless come to fight. Everyone who comes here knows there’s a chance they might die. Thus, if they do die, no one can complain, and it makes cleanup much easier. Of course, we don’t advertise what kind of place this is, but the smell of blood still permeates it. So even though it might make a nice refuge otherwise, the homeless stay away.”

“This is so cool! I thought the underground Tokyo Dome coliseum was the only one of these!” Mutsuko squealed.

“Look, there is no underground Tokyo Dome coliseum,” Yuichi said, instinctively turning away from his confrontation with Natsuki to correct Mutsuko’s ridiculous statement.

“Do you stream your fights on the internet?” she asked excitedly.

“The membership fee is expensive, but it’s possible to view it online... Who is she, again?” Natsuki turned back to check with Yuichi. She clearly had little experience with mood-shattering comments like Mutsuko’s. Yuichi couldn’t help but sympathize.

“Sorry, please ignore my sister. Anyway, we won’t tell anyone else about you. So please... won’t you let us go?”

“You know I can’t. Killing you two is the simplest way out of this.”

“You know, we could just run away.”

“Can you? I have no intention of letting you leave here, and even if you got past me, I have a friend blocking the entrance.”

“A friend?!” Yuichi hadn’t even considered that. He’d just assumed she was alone.

“Yu... You should have thought of that when Noro was captured! How else could she have brought her here when she was unconscious? She’d need a car! And Takeuchi’s a teenager, so she wouldn’t be driving. She must have had a collaborator!”

“Sis... Did you just come up with that deduction now?” Yuichi turned back to Mutsuko in annoyance. He could have used that information earlier.

“C-Certainly not!” Mutsuko’s triumphant expression collapsed into despondency. He must have been right. Yuichi knew that if Mutsuko had come up with such a theory beforehand, she wouldn’t have waited to reveal it.

She was really ruining the tension in the air. But even so, Yuichi turned back to Natsuki and continued the conversation.

“A friend... You mean an oni like Ibaraki?”

A serial killer friend, Yuichi thought. At the very least, whoever it was probably wasn’t human.

“Hmm? What do you mean? Did he reveal his secret? I can’t imagine how...”

“He talks a lot. He must really hate you.”

“Oh? That’s unexpected... I wonder if he underestimates me. Maybe I should have killed one of their species as an example to him.”

Fighting multiple opponents would be tricky by itself, and Yuichi still didn’t know how skilled Natsuki was. He decided to just ask.

“Are you... really tough?”

“Hmm? Good question. I’m no match for an oni in terms of brute strength. But that’s overrated in this day and age.” Natsuki reached into her breast pocket and pulled out something, then turned towards Yuichi.

“Huh?”

In a way, it was suited to the movie-like set stage around them, yet its appearance still took Yuichi by surprise.

It was a gun.

“Oni and other beings of the old world are extremely vulnerable to this kind of thing. Of course, it works on humans, too.”

Yuichi glanced at Mutsuko while trying not to take his eyes off the gun for too long.

“I’m sorry, Yu. I don’t know much about guns.” Mutsuko sounded genuinely apologetic.

It wasn’t a disappointment, though. His hopes hadn’t been high to start with. He knew that Mutsuko didn’t study small arms in detail, claiming they weren’t a realistic concern in Japan.

“Now, talking seems to be getting us nowhere, so I think I’ll kill you now. Are you sure you don’t want any final professions of love with Noro? I don’t mind giving you that long.”

“Nope, nothing like that,” Yuichi said with a sigh.

“B-Because we’re not like that!” Aiko stammered in irritation.

“Really? I was hoping for some kind of passionate kiss exchange, or something.”

“Yeah, give her a big old smoochie-poo!” Mutsuko threw her arms around Aiko and pretended to kiss her.

“No one asked you, Sis!” Yuichi groaned.

The tension was rapidly slipping away.

“I don’t feel like dying today, and I won’t let you kill Noro or my sister. If you want me dead, you’ll have to work for it,” Yuichi said, turning back to Natsuki.

“Oh, what a manly thing to say,” she said pleasantly. “I do like that kind of thing... But goodbye.”

With that, Natsuki pulled the trigger.

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“Huh?!” Natsuki’s eyes opened wide. She fired two more shots in

quick succession, but neither even left a scratch. Yuichi dodged them all with the slightest of movements.

"What's going on?!" Natsuki asked, her dismay unguarded.

"I thought you you were going to use some kind of superpower, but you just shoot people, huh? That's a relief."

It wasn't that she was missing on purpose. She had taken aim at his chest to ensure a direct hit. He was about ten meters away — more than close enough — and her bullet had gone exactly where she'd aimed it. Yuichi just wasn't there.

"It's not that surprising, is it? Bullets fly in a straight line from the barrel. They're the easiest things in the world to read," he said.

The moment she'd pulled the trigger, he'd stepped to the side, dodging the bullet. A simple enough thing to say, but nearly impossible for an ordinary person to do.

Natsuki stared blankly into space for a moment, then adjusted her aim.

Again and again she fired, pushing Yuichi towards a corner. She wanted to get him somewhere where he would have no room to dodge.

Soon, she had accomplished just that. She fired again.

But he didn't fall.

Natsuki's jaw fell in disbelief. It was inconceivable.

The bullet had been deflected.

Yuichi stood in front of her, holding his right arm perpendicular to the floor, along his median plane.

The sleeve of his blazer had ripped, revealing something black beneath. It was a weapon known as a tonfa. Yuichi had carried it in hidden in his blazer.

"Projectiles won't work against Yu! He can even dodge a bowgun in his face!" Mutsuko exclaimed.

"Yeah, Sis... though I thought I was dead when you started using real arrowheads without telling me..."

"That's a special baton known as a tonfa! It's made of steel so it can deflect even 9 mm bullets!"

"Why did you even have that?" Aiko asked in exasperation.

Natsuki listened in stunned silence.

"I had one in my room!" she chirped. "Yu said he won't carry blades, but it still works pretty well! And it's cool!"

After running out of bullets, Natsuki reflexively exchanged cartridges to reload. But no matter how many times she fired, she couldn't hit him.

"I bet I know what Yu is thinking... 'Now, Takeuchi! Cast your gun aside and come at me!'"

"I am *not* thinking that!"

Natsuki tossed her gun aside. To the others, it probably looked like she had risen to the provocation.

"Huh?" Yuichi squeaked uncertainly. He probably hadn't really

expected her to really throw her gun away.

"I can't believe it... I actually underestimated you..." Natsuki began to shift her stance forward. Surgical scalpels appeared in both of her hands.

"I'm going to dissect you," she cried, "and decorate my room with your skin and guts!" And then, she charged straight for him.

*****

Natsuki crossed the space between them in an instant, bringing a scalpel up in a swing. Yuichi blocked with his tonfa, and she sprang back instantly. The tonfa split in two and hit the floor with a clatter.

Cutting through steel. Was it a special property of the weapon, or was Natsuki just that skilled? Either way, he knew that he couldn't afford to take a direct hit. The slightest scratch might tear his arm off.

"There're a lot of theories about possible victims of Jack the Ripper, but there are five we know of for certain. They were all prostitutes, but there were signs that even after the incidents started, they invited Jack into their rooms willingly, which has led to a theory that he was really a woman. And he used some kind of blade for the kill, which is why we call him 'the ripper.' Because of the surgical precision with which he removed their internal organs, they think he might have been a medical professional... So Takeuchi being a woman fighting with scalpels is kind of a cliché," Mutsuko was explaining, barely even glancing at the fight between Yuichi and Natsuki.

"Mutsuko! This is no time for lectures! Sakaki's gonna die! Shouldn't you be helping him?" Aiko reproached her.

"Aw, Yu'll be fine. Anyway, under the 'woman' theory, it's weird to call the killer Jack, so they usually use Jill the Ripper or Jane the Ripper. Jack is a common name kind of like Taro in Japanese, see? And I guess Jane would be like Hanako, huh?"

"Excuse me! Is this really the time?" Yuichi screamed as he dodged scalpel slashes coming at him from all directions. Her apparent total lack of concern was really starting to get to him.

"Keep it up, Yu!" Mutsuko cheered.

"Sakaki!" Aiko screamed.

Mutsuko's lackadaisical encouragement betrayed a total lack of tension on her part. He was grateful that Aiko, at least, was screaming her heart out.

"Oh, Noro, I keep telling you, don't worry so much," Mutsuko said calmly. "He's using his furukami, it's just at a very low level! Probably because of that friend Takeuchi mentioned. He doesn't want to exhaust everything he's got just on Takeuchi and end up immobilized!"

That's true, but you don't have to tell her that, you know... Yuichi grumbled to himself as he continued to dodge. It was really annoying to

have someone see right through you.

“Oh, so you really are underestimating me...” Natsuki murmured icily. Her attacks picked up in speed.

Yuichi kept avoiding her blows. He knew he had to judge his counterattack carefully. If he got too careless, he could end up sliced. But even the dodging was starting to get dangerous...

Natsuki’s scalpels were already moving faster than his eyes could see. Her hands were moving in constantly-changing, disorienting patterns. He couldn’t keep dodging them forever.

He was moving at least halfway on instinct by now. If he kept this up, eventually, she would catch him.

He had no choice but to find a way to finish this now. He gathered up all of his focus, then thrust his arms out instinctively in the direction of the scalpels’ arc.

“Ah!” Natsuki’s eyes opened wide. Yuichi’s hands found purchase around her wrists.

The scalpels fell from her hands as he started to squeeze. He then tried to apply crushing force, but she wouldn’t bend. They were locked together in a stalemate.

“Wow, it’s impressive that she can hang in there against Yu’s grip strength! And he’s using a weak furukami, so his grip strength exceeds over 200 kg. She really must be a sort of yokai.”

Mutsuko’s leisurely commentary once again reached his ears. She must be completely unconcerned about him. He was glad to know she had faith in him and all, but a little pearl-clutching would still have been nice.

Natsuki’s murderous stare brought him back to reality. This was no time to be dividing his attention.

Natsuki’s hands were immobilized, but so were his. It was strength against strength. Neither one could use their hands, which meant that kicks were the only option. Even so, he could tell that Natsuki was on guard for any sign of sudden movement.

So he lashed out with a kick Natsuki couldn’t possibly anticipate.

It came from above, crashing down on Natsuki’s head.

Natsuki slumped to her knees, not knowing what had hit her.

*****

“Huh? What?” Aiko couldn’t believe what she’d just seen.

Yuichi had pitched forward, throwing his right leg up behind him. His toe had drawn an arc through the air, over his back, and crashed back down on top of Natsuki’s head.

She had never seen a person’s body move that way.

“Scorpion! A special number one finisher, making use of extreme flexibility to send a kick over your own back in a mimicry of a

scorpion's sting!" Mutsuko cried.

"...I don't know why, but something about knowing Sakaki's legs are that long kind of gets on my nerves..." Aiko murmured.

"No matter how incredible the move, she seemed to be able to tank it if she knew it was coming," Mutsuko continued. "But it looks like she didn't anticipate that one at all."

Yuichi looked down at Natsuki, who had been forced down to her knees.

She raised her face, looking up at Yuichi with tears in her eyes.

"Huh?" he asked.

"That was just mean..." she moaned.

"Um, well, we could stop this right now if you'd just drop that weird plan of yours..." Yuichi was caught off-guard by Natsuki's strange personality shift.

She began reaching a hand towards Yuichi, slowly and carefully. Taking it as a concession, he took her hand and helped her up.

"Yu, no!" Mutsuko shouted, leaping to her feet.

Just as she started to get to her feet, Natsuki suddenly tugged on Yuichi's hand, throwing off his balance.

Then she lashed out with a merciless kick, which Yuichi was too off-guard to dodge.

It struck him directly in the crotch.

*****

Her hit having landed, Natsuki smiled in triumph.

As long as Yuichi was standing, he seemed capable of defending his median plane against any attack. The only way to get past his guard was to disrupt his balance.

Once she had done that, all that was left was to kick with all her might.

A man's greatest weak point. Even the slightest touch would have an effect. It could rupture his balls. In the worst case scenario, the shock could be enough to kill him.

But her moment of victory was short-lived. Suddenly, the world went white around her.

An instant later, she processed the pain.

Once again, without knowing what hit her, she hit the ground, tumbled end over end, then slid into the pile of steel.

Blood leaked from her nostrils. She coughed up red.

The pile of steel began to sway. She tried to get away, but her legs wouldn't move. She just barely covered her head in time.

Just one hit had done all this. It was like being struck in the face with a steel beam.

"That hurt!" Yuichi cried out, his tone more annoyed than anything.

It was clear that the ball-shot hadn't been as effective as she'd thought.

It made no sense. Yuichi Sakaki... he defied understanding.

Why could he dodge her bullets?

Why could he stop her slashes?

Why could he strike from a deadlocked position?

Why could he counter after a kick to the balls?

Her mind was a whirl of questions. But she silenced them all. It didn't matter.

This was fun.

A feeling of joy welled up in her heart.

Yuichi was strong.

Oh, the ecstasy that killing him would bring her! It could satisfy her killing urge for years to come... Just the thought of it caused her to tremble.

Her lips began to curl upwards in a smile.

*****

"...Um... Sakaki got kicked, right? In his... um... you know..." Aiko stuttered, balking at actually saying the word. She knew that a man's crotch was his most vulnerable point.

"Hey... Yu, you let your guard down! You're lucky she went for the crotch-shot, but what if she'd used a scalpel instead?" Mutsuko seemed relieved, letting out a sigh as she sat back down on the steel.

"Why is that better?" Aiko asked.

"Because Yu can take it. He does kotsukake. It's a technique where you use your abdominal muscles to draw the balls up into your body."

"Um?" Aiko was dumbstruck as to how to respond. She didn't know much about boys' bodies. Maybe they could do that? Her health classes had never covered it, at least...

"There are ways of moving the body taught in old-style martial arts. You can change the position of your internal organs, or stop their functioning to channel that power elsewhere and stuff. Kotsukake is one simple form of that. Well, at the start, we just forced them in..."

"Huh? Forced them in..." Aiko turned bright red. She was imagining something entirely unseemly.

"Huh? Aw, c'mon. He didn't have hair down there yet, so it doesn't count!" Mutsuko waved her hands dismissively as she spoke.

Aiko found herself wondering, once hair grew down there, did it count?

"Hey! Stop talking about that! That was traumatic!" Yuichi shouted.

"Hey, Noro, in Japan we call them kintama, or 'gold balls,' but in America they call them 'family jewels.' Did you know that? I wonder if we had a similar inspiration. Anyway, I'm just glad that Yu's good ol' jewels are safe. He'll be getting a lot of use out of them, I bet!"

“U-Use? Um...” Aiko turned even redder and looked away. She didn’t have to ask. She could easily imagine what Mutsuko meant by that.

*****

“Quit talking about that already!” Yuichi groaned, desperate for the conversation to end. His sister was talking to a female classmate about his balls. He wished he was dead.

But that couldn’t be what he focused on. The battle wasn’t over yet.

Yuichi looked at Natsuki.

She pushed her way out from under the pile of ‘ and staggered to her feet, snapped her broken nose back into place, and snorted out a fountain of stored-up blood.

“Ah, this is amazing. What’s going on, hmm? Are you really human, Sakaki?”

“Look... Can we just call this off already? I swear we won’t tell anyone about you, so please, stop all this nonsense.”

“How can you say that? I’m so excited right now... Can’t you tell?” Natsuki began to stagger towards Yuichi.

“No, I can’t.”

“Come on, let’s keep going. I want more. More!”

Natsuki rushed into melee range, lashing out for Yuichi with a stab from her right hand while her left hand struck at his side. Even without scalpels in them, her hands were quite powerful. But they didn’t make contact.

As she fell upon him, Yuichi dropped his hips and lashed out. His hands caught Natsuki right in her soft chest. It was a move where the heels of both hands struck the opponent simultaneously, similar to a strike known as the Double Crashing Palm.

Natsuki was thrown back a second time, and hit the floor immobile.

This time, it was over.

Yuichi fell to a knee in exhaustion, the aftereffect of the furukami. He’d been using it in small doses, but now he’d reached his limit.

“Yu, you pervert!” Mutsuko shouted.

“Huh?” The accusation left Yuichi open-mouthed in shock.

“Sakaki, you lech!” Aiko added, parroting Mutsuko.

“Huh?!”

It had been a spur-of-the-moment desperation move, but to Mutsuko and Aiko, maybe it looked like he’d copped a feel. Mutsuko had taught him this move as part of his so-called “kamehameha training,” though, so he couldn’t figure out why she was so mad at him.

He’d survived a match to the death only to be called a pervert by his sister and his classmate. Could there be a more pathetic fate?

“Hey... Why do you have to call me that?”

“Yu! I know you wanted to touch them because they’re bigger than

Noro's, but that's no reason to cheat on her!"

"Um, could you not put it that way? It really hurts..." Aiko mumbled.

"Whew... I think I won, but what do we do now?" Yuichi collapsed onto the floor. Even sitting up straight was beyond him. Two battles in two days was taking a toll.

"We just have to talk to her, right? The battle's over, so she's got to do what we say," Aiko offered.

Yuichi agreed. If this wasn't enough to stop her, he didn't know what would.

"What the hell?" The sudden voice caused everyone to turn back.

A big man swollen with muscle had arrived at the edge of the arena.

The words "Serial Killer's Lackey" hung over his head.

There was a katana in his hand. He sounded genuinely surprised to see how the battle had turned out.

"Damn! She threw off my pacing..." Yuichi swore. He had known she had an ally in the wings, but Natsuki had taken all his attention.

He tried to sit up, but he couldn't muster any strength. He couldn't even find it in him to stand.

"Sis!" Yuichi cried out, pleadingly.

"Yeah, yeah. I got it, I got it. Whenever you can't deal with something, that's when I step in." As if reading Yuichi's mind, Mutsuko began strolling up to the large man.

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"I guess it's safe to assume you're against us, huh?" Mutsuko said haughtily.

Aiko came along with Mutsuko, cowering behind her. "A-Are you sure about this?"

The man was so tall she had to crane her neck to look up at him. He'd be a tough opponent even for Yuichi. It was hard to believe Mutsuko stood a chance.

The man didn't attack right away, perhaps still a bit off-guard about the situation. The thought that his boss might lose had probably never entered his mind.

"Don't worry! No need to be scared just because he's big! He might be stronger than me, but strength isn't what matters when it comes to incapacitating someone," Mutsuko said confidently.

As if coming to his senses, the big man broke out into a run, closing the distance between them quickly. Perhaps he thought she would be an easy mark, because he ignored the fallen Yuichi and went right after Mutsuko and Aiko.

Mutsuko took something out of her blazer pocket and gave it a light underhand toss.

It traced a neat arc directly for the charging man's face. He tilted his

neck to dodge it, but he was a bit too late. He hadn't realized the slow-flying object's real danger.

It exploded right in front of his face.

"Um..." Aiko stared in disbelief.

The man spun around clutching at his eyes.

"See? It doesn't matter how big you are! No one can withstand an explosion right to the face!"

"I guess not, but... What did you do?"

"It's a battery bomb! A homemade bomb made from a battery."

"Um... you walk around with that?" Aiko said. Everything about it was unbelievable. A bomb? There was a high school girl, standing in front of her, who walked around with homemade bombs?

"For self-defense!"

Suddenly, Aiko thought back to the dangerous objects she'd seen inside Yuichi's pen case and bag. Mutsuko had picked them out, so naturally, she had some of her own.

"And now, the finish!" Mutsuko drew something from her pocket. Aiko's jaw dropped. It looked like a gun.

She pointed it at the man and pulled the trigger. Something like a spring shot out of it, stuck in the man and caused his body to jolt. Then he fell over, limp.

"Is that... a pistol?" Aiko asked timidly.

Natsuki had had a gun, and Mutsuko had this thing. She was starting to fear for the future of Japan.

"It's a taser! I made this one, too. They're illegal in Japan, so I keep it secret! It's a type of stun gun, you know what that is?"

The bombs were probably illegal, too, but Aiko decided not to bring that up. "It's for self-defense, right? It electrocutes people?"

"Yes! It shoots out electrodes, so you can use it even at long range! Taser is the name of a company that makes them. The electric shock locks up the muscles and incapacitates the target. But it only has an effect while the electricity is running, so it's relatively harmless as weapons go! Stun guns themselves aren't illegal, but ones with a firing mechanism are!"

Aiko listened as Mutsuko joyfully went on and on about tasers.

"Um... He's unconscious, right?" The flow of electricity seemed to have stopped, but he still wasn't budging. Aiko began to wonder just how "harmless" these things really were.

"I guess maybe it's not good to turn up the voltage all the way!" Mutsuko said offhandedly, deflecting the question.

It was easy to imagine how increasing the voltage would increase the danger. Aiko felt her understanding of these siblings slipping away more and more.

"Whew... You think it's over? There's no one else left?" From his spot on the floor, Yuichi let out a sigh of relief and looked around.

Aiko did the same. Natsuki didn't appear to have any more friends.

"I think it's over. Well then, Yu, we'll get going the minute you're mobile again!" Even with the battle over, Mutsuko was still in her own little bubble. Aiko almost admired the way she let it all just roll off her back.

"Huh? What do we do with these two?"

"They won't be up for a while. So we can probably just leave a note or something." With that, Mutsuko walked up to the unconscious Natsuki.

She made a few furtive, secret motions, apparently writing something.

After a while, Mutsuko returned and declared, "Okay, let's go home!"

Epilogue: Is This How a Harem Starts?

The day after his death match with Natsuki, Yuichi returned to school. He was on his guard.

They'd left the unconscious Natsuki on the floor and returned home. What would she do after she woke up?

Mutsuko seemed to have had some thoughts about it, but she had yet to share them with Yuichi.

Maybe she hadn't changed her mind about slaughtering everyone. Maybe she'd start attacking people indiscriminately. If that happened, he'd need to stop her, whatever the cost.

Fortunately, a full night's sleep had let him recover from the furukami, and he was feeling ready. He could fight Natsuki again if he had to.

Nothing happened on the way to school, or as he arrived at the school gate. Everything seemed normal.

With his guard still up, Yuichi headed for his classroom. He opened the door with trepidation.

The first thing he saw were the words "Jack the Ripper." Natsuki Takeuchi was there.

She was at her seat, facing forward with an sour look on her face. There was a large band-aid over her nose, and a patch over her right eye, and her entire face was swollen. It was rather painful to see her like that, sitting in the middle of the brightly-lit classroom. Even though it was the result of their fight, Yuichi felt a little guilty.

Yuichi watched Natsuki, not knowing what to do. But he couldn't stay there forever.

"Morning," he said, awkwardly. It was hard to talk naturally on the morning after you had pummeled each other.

"M-Morning." Natsuki made eye contact for an instant, then immediately looked away.

Yeah, it would be awkward, huh? Yuichi thought, letting it go as he went to take his seat.

"Ace Striker."

That was fast! He bounced back already?

Shota had gotten there ahead of him, the "Ace Striker" title back over his head.

"Congratulations." Yuichi said offhandedly.

"Huh? For what?"

"No reason," Yuichi smiled. "I just wish more people could be like you."

“Orihara! The last chapter of *Demon King* was really great!” Mutsuko exclaimed.

“R-Really?”

“Yeah! The way General Belnort’s Colossus crushed and kicked around the hero’s army as it advanced was really exhilarating!”

“Th-Thank you...” Kanako responded shyly.

What the heck? Colossus? Yuichi thought.

Class was over for the day. Yuichi was dangling from the bouldering protrusions on the ceiling of the survival club, listening in to the conversation in bafflement.

He’d decided to try out the rocks on the wall, climbed until he reached the ceiling, and then kept going. Eventually, he’d reached the middle.

He looked down at the club room from his vantage point.

Below him were his sister, “Big Sister,” “Isekai Fanatic” Kanako, and “Love Interest” Aiko. Mutsuko was talking to Kanako about her novel.

“What’s gonna happen next? Wait, no, don’t tell me! I can’t wait to read it for myself!” she cried.

“All I’ll say is that the last of the twelve Hell Kings is going to make his appearance.”

“The full set! But won’t that be overwhelming when all the human side has is the hero?”

“Don’t worry about that. The hero’s side is about to pick up a powerful ally.”

“Oh, sorry. I guess I made you tell me...”

“It’s okay. You’re the only person who really enjoys it anyway,” Kanako said, a little sadly.

Yuichi felt guilty. He still hadn’t read Kanako’s novel. Judging by the way she acted, it didn’t seem very popular.

“I think it’s amazing that you’re writing a novel, Orihara. I hope you’ll let me read it!” Aiko responded with enthusiasm. “By the way, what’s the title? What’s it about?” It seemed Aiko had been listening without knowing what they were talking about.

“Well, it’s called *My Demon Lord is Too Cute to Kill and Now the World is in Danger!*, and...”

It seemed like Kanako would be talking for a while. Aiko listened with a somewhat dubious expression. She had asked, after all, and Kanako was her senior, so she couldn’t beg off now.

A certain “Otaku Haiku” came to Yuichi’s mind. *“I didn’t ask that. Cut back on the detail there. Really, knock it off.”*

But it sure is peaceful...

Natsuki hadn’t started any more trouble. She had just been acting normal in class as far as he could see, so they were probably out of the woods.

Yuichi released the handholds, landed on the floor, and took a seat

across from Aiko and the others.

Aiko looked at Yuichi as if pleading for help.

Yuichi refused to make eye contact. In *Demon King*-related matters, she was on her own.

"Hey, where are the other club members, anyway?" Yuichi shrugged off Aiko's glare to ask a somewhat overdue question. The current attendees were the same people who had been there yesterday. He was starting to wonder if other members even existed.

"Well, participation is up to the individual. I'm sure they'll stop by if they feel up to it," Mutsuko said.

"How many more are there?" Yuichi asked.

"Three more. Maybe four?"

"Why aren't you sure? You should at least know how many people are in your club."

"That's not what I mean... Oh, here's one now." The club room door opened. Had another club member showed up? Yuichi looked over to see.

"Jack the Ripper." It was Natsuki Takeuchi. The swelling in her face had gone down, and she'd removed the band-aid and the eyepatch. She seemed to have some degree of healing factor, if not as good as a vampire's.

"Huh?" he asked.

Natsuki barged into the room, walked up to Mutsuko, and handed her a paper.

Yuichi snuck a peek at it. It was a club membership submission form.

"Huh?!"

"Oh, I left this with her, along with the note yesterday!"

"Hang on! Takeuchi? What are you doing here?!"

"What do you think? Club activities." She tilted her head at him. There was none of her icy manner from before. She was acting completely normal. "That is, I... I'm full, so..." Natsuki murmured, averting her eyes from Yuichi.

"I don't get it... just what did you put in that note, Sis?" Yuichi demanded.

"Well, watching you yesterday, I started thinking. Takeuchi's killing urge seems sort of like a sexual urge! So maybe she can divert it just by keeping her body moving! She looked really satisfied after you knocked her around and beat her unconscious. So I thought, maybe she doesn't have to kill people, she just needs to spar with you! So I put that in the note."

What the hell kind of logic is that?! Yuichi looked at Natsuki. Her face was bright red. She must have felt embarrassed.

"Hey! Wait, please! Wh-What do you mean, sexual urge...?" Aiko's face turned red and she stood up. There was a lot she looked like she wanted to say about that, but she couldn't find the right words.

Yuichi looked at Aiko, and had a completely unrelated realization. *This club is full of girls! Am I the only guy? What about the other three club members?*

"I look forward to working with you, Yuichi Sakaki," Natsuki smiled. Above her head appeared the words "Love Interest II."

"Why?! This makes no sense!" he cried out before his mind could protest.

Her label had previously been a reflection of her bloodthirsty nature. Yuichi had no idea what was going on.

"What's wrong, Yu?" Mutsuko looked at Yuichi quizzically.

"Huh? Oh, nothing..." he lied, taking his seat.

If Mutsuko learned he'd just acquired another love interest, she would probably start pouting again. He checked just to be sure, but she was still "Big Sister."

Does that mean this one's wrapped up, at least? He didn't have to worry about serial killers coming after him anymore.

There was that mysterious organization, Noro's brother, and other unsettling things waiting in the wings, but Yuichi decided to be optimistic and cross those bridges when he came to them.

His high school life had only just begun.

LOVE INTEREST II

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by Tsuyoshi Fujitaka

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Edited by Emily Sorensen

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